

A Fire in the Sky

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Category: Halo

Genre: Drama, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: Completed

Published: 2011-09-30 04:59:23

Updated: 2012-07-18 04:46:58

Packaged: 2016-04-26 23:28:53

Rating: M

Chapters: 13

Words: 67,811

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Prequel to FTA. Here, we follow Garek through his service to the Covenant as he encounters many troubles. M for language.

1. Prologue: Misplaced

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**Location: Sparring Arena aboard the Seeker of Truth, Fleet of Particular Justice**

**Date: Sunday, July 4, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Ship Clock: 10:12 Hours**

The reports of one's service told many people many different things. How they act in the face of great peril, how one responds to proper authoritative figures and their orders, or even something as simple as the way one carried out their morning routine. For the one reading said reports - currently a shadow in a dark corner of the room - they meant a possible recruit for his division, and he admitted to himself that he was beyond impressed. However, he judged there was a proper way to go about such things, his sharp maroon eyes falling on a group of three. He observed them silently as they stood at one of many octagonal pads. Unfortunately, the reports had been simple text documents, so he had no image to go with the name he sought, one Garek 'Izakee.

Two Sangheili on the pad, both Minor Domos, the third being their superior, a General. One Minor was much bulkier and darker than his opponent, the latter looking as though he'd been thrown into a pit of ash and left to starve. His somewhat dark musing was interrupted when the latter spoke, trying to coax his opponent, "What is the matter, Rotje? Scared?"

His opponent, a very dark complected male, very nearly as black as the vacuum outside, chortled. "I would ask you the same. What are

you waiting for, brother?" The shadow lightly shook his head; the dark male wasn't who he was looking for. Much too arrogant, and a little on the loud side. Much too tense to be the one he sought.

"Waiting for your patience to wither away into nothing," the other mocked. His voice held some arrogance, but also a certainty and calmness that told anyone with any sense that he knew he was going to win their spar. The shadow started to form an idea that this may be whom he sought, but he wouldn't jump to that conclusion just yet.

The shadow's attention was grabbed again when the General sighed, a great deal of exasperation in his tone. "Just get on with it. I have others that I need to evaluate." The shadow decided then to emerge from his spot in the darkness, recognizing the General's voice as one of an old friend. His armor showed its age, colored in a pristine yellow and trimmed in black and multiple greys; it was scuffed, scratched, or dented beyond repair in more than one place. The mark of a true warrior, one that believed in showing the battle scars as a sign of merit. The General gave the newcomer a brief glance before turning back to the ring. "Sometime today, please." As they complied and finally charged each other, the General turned and looked at the male beside him. "Nazo, is that you?"

"Took you long enough," the shadow, Nazo, said merrily, a smirk playing across his mandibles. He gestured to the ring, observing the two grapple with one another; it was clear that the darker male, Rotje, was already losing, but he was putting up quite a good fight. "Who are they?"

The General, one Nazo knew to be Tajo 'Szemee, sighed. "Two soldiers who are beginning to try my patience," he said loudly before lowering his voice, so only he and Nazo could hear. He gestured to each as he named them, "They are two of my best, Minor Domos 'Tsomee and 'Izakee."

Nazo squinted slightly, just catching sight of a particular rune before it disappeared in another clash of bodies and armor. "Minor 'Izakee carries the mark of a Specialist? He does not look like a doctor to me," he said, a confused brow raised.

Tajo shook his head, some uncertainty and suspicion in his eyes, "He is the sharpshooter in my unit."

Nazo hummed, tapping a mandible with a claw, "That is odd." A sniper is an armored division wasn't unheard of, but it was very rare, and indeed odd when one would be found; what need would tanks and personnel carriers need of a sniper, other than to remove the obvious threats from battle?

"Yes, I suppose it is," Tajo said. "So, what brings you here? I have yet to see you spar in my time on this ship..."

"I need to have a word with 'Izakee once you are through with him." A loud thud, followed by a victorious roar was more than enough cause for the two officers to turn their attention back to the ring. Garek 'Izakee stood over a fallen Rotje 'Tsomee, both panting lightly from their friendly brawl; the former had a few scratches and a small bruise forming on his face, while the former had a dislocated

mandible and a single, small cut near the back of his neck. Nazo couldn't help but grin, however briefly; worse for wear, but still victorious and seemingly ready for more.

"Very good, 'Izakee," Tajo called as the aforementioned Minor hauled his comrade off the mat. They clapped each other on the left shoulder pad and bumped foreheads, a sign of great respect and that there would be no qualms once they parted ways.

"Thank you, sir." As a show of humility, Garek applied his fellow's helmet, and even gave it a gentle slap to ensure it was secure before doing the same with his own. _"He may make a fine prospect yet," _Nazo thought.

"Minor 'Tsomee, clean your wounds and check in with Major 'Resavee before reporting back to your post. 'Izakee, someone would like to have a word with you," he said as Garek moved to follow Rotje.

"Who?" Garek immediately snapped to attention as Nazo cleared his throat.

"Perhaps your attention to detail could use some work," Nazo said, amused. "Walk with me," he said, moving for the exit, "Your General has informed me that you are a sharpshooter?" He already knew this, as it was on file, but the Minor didn't need to know about all of that.

Garek gave a single, confident nod as he followed the older male; an Ultra, he noticed. Perhaps his attention to detail _did _need some work. "I am the best in the 349th...of the handful we have, anyway," he stammered; so, authority made him nervous...or was it the fact that Nazo was a stranger? The Ultra decided not to ponder on it, as it wasn't important. "Excuse my disrespect, sir, but you seem to know a great deal about me. I can tell by the way you speak...but, I have no idea who you are."

They stopped once they were in a mostly unpopulated corridor, Nazo snapping his mandibles in a shrug. "No offense to be taken, as I have rudely neglected to introduce myself. Ultra Nazo 'Bezatee." He sighed, thinking for just a moment, "I will get directly to the point, 'Izakee. You do not belong in the 349th. I believe your skills are being wasted, so I have a proposition for you."

Garek leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, confusion playing across his face. " I am listening."

Nazo gave a small, reassuring smile; he knew already that he had this Minor under his charge. "I have seen your records, and I believe the Rangers would-"

"Rangers?" Garek interrupted, shaking his head. "I do not think I would quite qualify for that, sir...er, excuse me."

The Ultra waved a dismissive hand; he was not there to give orders or berate the Minor. They were just two warriors discussing possible opportunity. "Well, your records say otherwise. Listen, all I need is a definitive answer from you, and you will not hear from me again if you say no."

Garek rubbed the back of his neck. "I need some time to think about it, sir."

The Minor's nervousness was beginning to nag at him, however little; what had happened to the confidence displayed in the ring? He would have to speak to him at a later time. He gave a crisp nod, already walking away, "I understand. Being a Ranger is as dangerous as it is rewarding. Come find me when you make up your mind." He smiled at the faint murmur at his back.

"Rewarding...?"

**Location: 349th Enlisted Bunks**

**Ship Clock: 19:05 Hours**

Rotje looked at the door from his bunk as someone entered. "Garek! I have looked everywhere for you. We had a scrimmage against F-Company, remember?" He snapped his mandibles at not receiving a response. "Garek?"

"I heard you," Garek clipped. "I had some things to take care of."

"What are you doing?"

Garek stopped gathering his things to look across the aisle. "I am being transferred."

Rotje sat up, his brows furrowed and mandibles curled in disbelief. "Transferred? What are you talking about?"

"I signed on with the Rangers."

Rotje scoffed. "Those psychopaths?"

Garek paused for a moment before continuing. "What do you mean?"

"They jump from Phantoms directly into enemy lines, or fight out in the vacuum!"

"So?" Garek said, hefting his now-full pack. "I would be more useful with them than I am here."

"That is a lie, and you know it," Rotje murmured, lying back.

Garek huffed. "Whatever you say. I do not belong in the 349th, Rotje."

"You do not believe that."

"No, you will not believe me." Garek looked around at the mostly-empty bunks; a few of the soldiers nearby were glaring at him. If anything was apparent to him at that moment, it was that these warriors - males he considered brothers - would be pleased to see him go, for the simple fact of his combat specialization. That, and he had yet to be defeated by a single one of them in the sparring ring, save for Tajo, and on one occasion, Rotje. "My company is far from favored, anyway," he murmured.

"And you think it will be, in the Rangers?" Rotje snorted before placing his head on the pillow. "Good luck," he finished half-heartedly.

"I will see you around," Garek replied over his shoulder as he made for the exit.

"Yeah," Rotje muttered, dimming the lights around his bunk.

It irked Garek that his friend wasn't pleased about his transfer, but he would get over it; they had done worse to each other, over smaller things. He pushed that from his mind and headed toward his new barracks, where new experiences and, he hoped, friends awaited.

2. Chapter I: Righteous Psychotics

Chapter I: Righteous Psychotics

**Location: Fleet of Particular Justice, aboard the Seeker of Truth**

**Date: Monday, July 5, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Ship Clock: 08:00 Hours**

Nazo paced up and down the aisle between the rows of bunks, silently scrutinizing each new volunteer. "For those of you who have yet to become acquainted with me," he began. "I am Ultra 'Bezatee, your new commanding officer. All of you _thought _you knew what you were volunteering for... well, you were wrong. _None _of you will have it easy, I do _not _pick favorites. The training you will receive here will be some the worst any of you have ever gone through, bordering on unbearable." He noticed a few of the soldiers tense.

"That being said, if any of you have second thoughts or think you will be unable to make it, please step into the aisle now." He caught one of the younger volunteers place a hoof forward, only to quickly replace it. He ignored those who had stepped into the aisle and stopped his pacing before the Minor. "What is your name?"

The Sangheili twitched a mandible before answering, "Ar'n 'Drakosee, sir!"

"I suggest you make up your mind, 'Drakosee. _This instant_."

"I am staying, sir!"

"I do not want to see hesitation from you again. Are we clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

"Good," he said, resuming his pacing. "For those of you who stepped forward, you will not be seen as cowards or those who lack honor; the Rangers are _not _foreveryone. Gather your belongings and report back to your commanding officers." He waited in the back of the room while they complied. Once they were gone, he walked to the door and stopped in the threshold. "For those of you who stayed, there is no turning

back now. I recommend you get to know one another, because your training begins at 0300 tomorrow. Welcome to the 482nd Ranger Battalion."

Garek looked around after Nazo exited, finding that no one paid him any mind. His eyes fell on the younger Minor, seeing that their situation was similar. _"Here goes nothing."_ He approached as the Minor sat on his bunk. "Hello."

"Hey," he said without looking up. A young fellow, he was, facial features touched by the trials of military training, but not of the cruel embrace of war. To that, Garek could somewhat relate; he had bore witness to the reality of it, but he had yet to be fired upon. Gods above, this fellow could not be more than seventeen!

Tone, soft and a little amused, as was his way, he said just what the young fellow already knew. A little clarity never hurt anyone, he thought. "Pay him no mind. He simply did what he had to do."

"Oh? I did not knowing being an _ass_ was necessary."

Garek chuckled; so, the fellow had a sense of humor, however sarcastic. "We will both find out some day, hm?"

"Hmph! Perhaps..." The fellow finally made eye contact. Amber orbs met his gaze, soft with youth, but also hard and cold with understanding, knowledge, skill unspoken. Clearly, the youth had lived through tough times. Perhaps...that was just as good as being trained through childhood and adolescence? The male sighed, heavy with doubt, "I think I should have gone with the others."

"Ha! Are you afraid of what we may face?"

A frown. "Hell no!" The look of scorn he received made his chest deflate; defiance in the face of logic often failed, and both of them knew it. "I cannot say, for certain. Perhaps, a little," he finished with a shrug. Another wise choice. This fellow would be fine.

"Stick with me, and you will make it through this. Garek," he said, extending his hand.

"Ar'n." Palms met and fingers intertwined, primary and secondary thumbs met at the claw-tips, and they gave a single firm shake. "Well, now that we are no longer strangers...I suppose I should ask about you. Your 'story', if you will."

Garek sat on the now-unoccupied bunk across from him, grunting; well, these were a little more comfortable than his previous arrangements, at least! He hummed. "Heh...where would you like for me to begin, brother? There is not much to tell."

A snicker, jovial and kind. "I am not after your biography, if that is what you imply! What did you do, before this?"

Garek nodded, the male's curiosity made clear. It was a simple request, and one that most wished to know; wanton to know the prowess of the battle brother at your side was...nearly fetishized among Sangheili. If one did not know, how could one easily garner an inkling of trust? "Mm...well! Due to my...upbringing, I was not given the same opportunities as the other fellows in this room. Academy was

no simple feat, as I could not properly prepare for it. That much is clear by my size, I am certain." Ar'n only gave him a shrug. "However, I made it...well, clearly. Heh! Er...I was assigned to the 349th Armored Corp, under the command of one General 'Szemee. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

He was met with a shake of the head. It seemed Ar'n did not want to interrupt, much to Garek's chagrin; he loathed speaking for extended periods. He felt that he had a tendency to ramble. He would not allow that to deter him, however. "Anyway. 'Szemee was good to me. Showed me all he could, if I did not already know it. It was he, that placed a Type-51 in my hands, much to the dismay of his subordinates, and my...direct superiors. Never have I seen so much...skepticism from grown men."

"Ah...I see. A sharpshooter, in a mobile infantry unit...They loathed your presence."

"Aye," Garek sighed. "They would call me a coward...in front of the General, no less."

"Idiotic bastards," Ar'n scoffed. "It surprises me, without end, how some so ignorant, can reach a position of power and responsibility, or call themselves a Brother..."

"There was only one I reason I never requested a transfer. An old friend of mine," he clarified to Ar'n's raised brow. Garek suddenly laughed. "Fools that we were, we caused so much trouble when we were your age."

Arms folded across armored chest; the fellow looked as though he didn't take kindly to the comparison of age. "You cannot be that much older than me."

"I am likely not, but still. There was this one time, we broke into the Quartermaster's office and drank all of his private reserve. Oh, Rotje got into so much trouble."

"He is the friend of yours?" Garek nodded, and Ar'n leaned forward a little, intrigue furrowing his brows. "What did he do?"

"After we had stumbled around the ship for a few hours, we found ourselves in the mess hall, where Rotje got the bright idea to start doing impressions of the Prophet of Truth."

"I do hope you jest," Ar'n said with a snicker.

"Ha! Not even an imaginative, habitually-lying drunkard could make this up! Anyway, it turns out that it was time for the officers to eat. Both the Shipmaster and the Quartermaster were there." Garek shook his head. "We would have had it worse, if the Shipmaster had not found it hilarious."

"Which Shipmaster?"

"The one that commands this ship."

"Is that so?" Another nod. "I can see how that would help with your reputation amongst superiors..." They shared a brief chuckle before he continued his friendly interrogation. "How were you

punished?"

"Mm...We would have gotten core maintenance duty, but the Shipmaster let us off easy."

"Ugh, core maintenance...That is a job for Huragok and Unggoy. What did you get instead?"

"After discovering where we had gotten so heavily...warm and merry, we had to be the Quartermaster's personal assistants for sixty-three collective cycles."

Ar'n hummed skeptically, but his eyes remained intent and curious, "Is that all?"

"It was horrible having to work under him...however! Anything is better than core maintenance, on that I am sure we can agree!" Another laugh, and Ar'n nodded. Now, it was Garek's turn to be interrogative. "What about you?"

"I do not have any stories like that. I am fresh out of Academy, and I did not really have any friends."

"Loner?"

"No. For some reason, the others in my group wanted to avoid me like I was some kind of plague."

"Were they afraid they would become short?"

Ar'n's face suddenly hardened. A nerve had definitely been struck with that remark. "I am not short."

Garek held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. "Relax. I was just messing with you."

"Good! You do not want to get on my bad side. Some of them learned that the hard way."

"It sounds to me like you do have a story to tell," Garek said, taking his turn to cross his arms.

"It is not worth telling. All I really had to do was show him that my height did not make me weak."

"And how did you do that?"

Ar'n growled lowly, exasperated. Garek, apparently, wasn't going to let it go. "He was an ambitious fool! Wanted to be Spec Ops," he scoffed. "He thought he was perfect in every possible way. Well, after he had bothered me nonstop for a few days, he found out that there is no such thing...discovered that his 'perfect' face made the perfect target for my fist!"

The fellow wasn't much of a story teller, then. Pity. "How bad was it?"

"Let us just say that he is missing a few teeth, and that many more are broken."

"Damn," Garek muttered. "I will make a mental note to not make you angry."

"It would not be a terrible idea."

"Did you get into any trouble for that?"

Ar'n shrugged. "You could say so. I was nearly arrested for 'aggravated assault'...which, really, was not far from the truth."

Garek raised a brow. "_Nearly _arrested?"

"He came from a powerful family; his grandfather was on the High Council. When we were called into the instructor's office, he wanted to press charges." Ar'n shook his head. "Our instructor laughed in the bastard's face. That old bastard was one the few that actually _liked_ me."

"Excuse my interruption. Just out of curiosity, why did he like you? Did you have something in common?"

"He liked my determination and ability to throw a punch, or so he told me...he said, 'Boy, there is a fire in your hearts and ambition nagging at your eyes...use those and turn them to passion, skill, and honor, and you will go far in this Covenant...' I cannot say that I actually believed him at the time, but...here I am." Ar'n frowned as he thought. "That is about it. Not much else happened throughout my training."

Garek nodded. An ill temperament, easily provoked...however, the younger fellow would certainly deliver justice where it was due. Honesty should have been clear to everyone, and he was glad to recognize it when he heard it. Moving things along, he returned Ar'n's earlier question. "What do you specialize in?"

"Reconnaissance, just about anything to do with tech. Apparently, I have good aim." A digit rose to match the list, the delivery simple and casual. Not that Garek needed much explanation or forethought. One mention, however, caught his attention.

"Tech?"

"Hacking, decryption, things of that nature," there was that shrug again. It was nearly trademark! "Er, do you have a secure PDA, or a datapad? Anything with an encryption..." A datapad was offered, Ar'n typing away at glyphs with a sense of...glee? A glance would be spared every so often, and within a few silent moments, Garek had the unlocked item on his lap.

He frowned, seeing messages to his family on the screen. Very personal messages, the likes of which he would rather not share with _anyone_, not even his greatest friend; that said a lot, as he used to confide in Rotje for most anything. Thoughts, moods, and for a few chance times before academy, desires; even still, the Brother knew little of the toils in his home, not that Rotje didn't have his suspicions. That, however, was a story for another time. His gaze went to the screen, to Ar'n's face, and back again. He wanted to be upset, but all he could garner was disbelief. "How did you do

that?"

"I took a guess, based on your mannerisms. Tech and Reconnaissance go hand-in-hand." The fellow wasn't incorrect, he realized, but the thought that he could access anyone's personal documents, should the wanton arise, was entirely disconcerting.

"Just...do not through my files..." A few quick keystrokes, and his password changed to something he hoped Ar'n would have to actually think about: the identification number of the FoF tag implanted in his right wrist.

"Why would I go through a friend's private files?"

One detail of that question caught his attention. They had certainly conversed about themselves, if only to get an idea of what the other was like, but...he never considered that to make him a friend with someone. It mattered little, he supposed; if Ar'n thought them friends, he would respect that. "You and I, friends?" Another shrug! He thought about taking tally of every shrug Ar'n made from there on, just to have something to pass the time on an off day. "I enjoy being right..."

"Beg pardon?"

"Rotje and I had a brief squabble, during which, I brought up the lack of...favor toward my presence. He said, and I quote, 'And you think it will be, in the Rangers?' Certainly, a good question, but...I digress. Oh, he also called these lot psychopaths!"

"What would make us psychopaths?"

"I suppose we will find out tomorrow, hm? However, I suppose we should try to speak with the others, see if we can gain further companionship...or, perhaps a rest is in order."

Ar'n stood and set about slipping free of the confines of his Combat harness. A day's worth of traveling to and fro, as well as the stress of such, showing around his eyes once the helmet left his head. Not that the hard features on his face helped any; he was handsome in his own right, but it would take one of particular taste to go weak in the knees over him. "Both are terrific ideas, indeed...however, I believe I shall choose the latter. Other acquaintances can be made later."

The point was made and understood, Garek opting to settle down for a nap as well. Armor quickly came off, only to be neatly stacked for the morning, bodysuit neatly folded beside that. As much as he loathed his own appearance, no one in the barracks was a stranger to nudity...or, they shouldn't have been. "Rest well, brother. We will likely need as many hours as we can get..."

Ship Clock: 02:55 Hours

Garek snapped his eyes open as someone banged loudly on a sheet of metal with a security baton. If there was one thing he loathed waking to, it was the sharp cry of electricity on steel. "You have three minutes to get your Ranger harnesses from the armory in the ship's midsection and return back here! No taking gravity lifts, either! Rangers do not take shortcuts!"

One of his brethren groaned as he quickly replaced his standard combat armor. "That is a twenty minute walk from here..." He nodded in that soldier's direction, getting Ar'n attention as Nazo quickly walked over.

"Then," he began, roughly poking the soldier in the chest with the baton. At least the officer made sure to not depress the trigger, lest he give his underling a sharp jolt. "I suggest that you run, _Minor_."

"Even then, it is--"

"The clock is ticking, and your armor is _still _in shambles at your boots!" He turned as the soldier began fumbling with the pieces. "If he does not make it on time, all of you will be punished with him. Now move!"

"Have you noticed something?" Ar'n said as he and Garek sprinted for their destination. Doors with empty rooms and dead-end hallways sped past them; such was the design of Covenant ships. More than a few Unggoy squealed in panic as they surged forward, the thunder of their boots filling the air.

"Could you be more specific, brother?"

"The lack of the other species in this section of the ship. Specific enough?" Ar'n quipped; neither of them were very personable in the morning, it seemed. The number of things they had in common was steadily rising.

"I noticed. It is quite...nice, is it not?"

"Aye. I _loathe _the Jiralhanae, damn apes. Excuse me," Ar'n quickly finished as they ran past a Sangheili who had to sidestep from their path. As they slid to a stop before the marked armor stands within the armory, Nazo stepped away from a gravity lift. _"Cheater," _Ar'n thought bitterly. _"'Rangers do not take shortcuts'. Ha, my ass!"_

"Excellent timing," he said as they attached each armor plate mechanically. "Now get back to your bunks. Quickly!" They shared short glances as he stepped into the opposite gravity lift before shrugging and sprinting the way they came, passing several of the others.

The two were fit, they had to be, but the legs of the shorter male could only keep pace with his taller companion for so long, and Ar'n began to loose speed. Encouraging fellow that he was, Garek slowed pace to keep side-by-side with Ar'n. "Come! We are nearly there!"

"Shut up! You have longer legs than I do...so, please, refrain from being an ass," he huffed, the pair resting at the foot of their respective bunks. "Because...I just may have to give it a kick to dislodge your head..."

"Harsh," came the quip, and they both shared a short titter; their friendship had fallen into place quickly, it seemed...Garek hoped that was the case, anyway.

Nazo crossed his arms upon entering the barracks. He did not smile, he did not make a show of any sort of satisfaction. He even deadpanned, "Do either of you have any idea how far you just went?" They remained standing at attention, silent. "Three miles in one minute, fifteen seconds flat. Needless to say, I am impressed."

"Thank you, sir," they said simultaneously, panting slightly from their exertion. It was certainly an impressive feat, and it began to show in the burn that crept into their legs, the tension growing against their ribs, and the pits already present in their stomachs. Garek doubted that he could eat if he wanted to.

Nazo was not finished, it seemed. There was always a catch. "_However_, that will mean nothing if your brothers fail to make it back here in the next...thirty seconds. At ease."

I have an interrogative, sir. If I may?" Ar'n said.

The Ultra quirked a brow, "You may."

"I have heard whispers that a human planet was discovered in a nearby system. Is that true?"

"Where did you hear that, 'Drakosee?" Nazo narrowed his eyes as Ar'n averted his gaze. "_I am waiting_â€|"

"I, er, hacked into the ship's databanks."

"I see. Report to my office when we are done here," Nazo said, just as the others filed into the barracks. "I said to be there and _back_ in three minutes," he thundered as they all stood at attention. "Tell me, how you all expect to survive combat, if you cannot be prepared for it?! An enemy can strike at any moment. They do not care if you are fully armored and shielded or as bare as the day you miserable wretches were allowed into this world. Since you failed this _extremely simple_ exercise, you all have to refill methane tanks and unload supply ships." During a pause, someone asked to speak. "Denied! After you have signed in your old gear, head to the nearest loading bay. Go. _Not you_, 'Drakosee," he called as Ar'n took a step. After they had entered his office, "Lock the door and have a seat."

"I am in trouble, are I not?"

"No," Nazo said, hands folding atop his desk. "Hacking into the databanks is no simple feat. I simply wish to know how you did it."

"I waited until they were changing the security measures; encryptions, algorithms, and the like."

Nazo frowned. "That is done by Huragok."

"I am well aware. Even so, I had plenty of time to gain access."

"_Three seconds_ is plenty of time?"

"When one is trying to gain access to security, yes," Ar'n said, warily scratching at his neck.

"Why did you not become an operative, then? I am certain that Special Operations would greatly appreciate having someone with your...particular skills."

"If I wished to hide from conflict, I would have...but, my place is with my brothers, on the frontlines." Ar'n was confused at the smile that greeted him. The gesture felt out of place on the Ultra's face, especially after bellowing at his underlings for being a mere eight seconds late. What came to follow would only build on his confusion.

"Good answer, 'Drakosee. Now, report to the loading bay."

"Yes sir," he said, standing. He did not question, he did not even think. Slowly, he was realizing that thinking would probably end his life in battle. He would have to learn how to mechanize himself, he supposed.

"And 'Drakosee?" The Minor turned in the doorway. "I want you to forget anything you saw on those databanks and never hack into security again, or I will not hesitate to have you thrown in the brig to rot. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir, already forgotten."

"Excellent, now be gone." Nazo shook his head once he was alone. "For all of his faults, he is going to make quite the Ranger."

**Location: Loading Bay of the Seeker of Truth**

**Ship Clock: 11:26 Hours**

The area was bustling with tall warriors, all clad in pearly off-white. Orders were barked back and forth, some bickered, and others worked in utter silence. Crates were removed from stacks, removed from a Phantom, and stacked again. "Where are you from, anyway?" Ar'n said, his and Garek's turn to lift one of many crates arriving.

He grunted, his legs still burning from earlier. The free hours they would receive later were not going to be very pleasant, that much he could assure himself. "Tarasun. How about you, brother?"

He felt for the shorter fellow, for he had to get under this crate to place it on the stack, and these were far from light. A growled slipped from his throat, the burden gone. "Juz'n," he huffed.

"Juz'n? I have heard many a...discouraging thing, about that place."

"Most of what you have heard is likely true. It is a rough place to live. Tarasun, that is a nice city. The shining jewel of Sangheilios, some say!"

Garek hummed. "It is crowded most hours of the day, it is loud, and I

would not recommend the company of the...pompous individuals within Her walls. I prefer the surrounding mountains, to be honest."

Their turn came again, and Ar'n sighed. He was clearly fed up with the work, but at least it was going smoothly, quickly, without error. "You mean the mountains that house all of the indigenous tribes?"

Garek shrugged. "They are not bad people. And, they are not indigenous, just," he paused, searching for the right word, "Separated."

"I have heard that most of them are exiles, outcasts."

"I never saw anything wrong with them, personally. While they are certainly odd people, they are easy to talk to and even easier to trade with."

"Trade," Ar'n repeated, his voice plagued with a disbelief. "What could a disconnected tribe possibly have to trade?"

Garek clawed a mandible in thought. Memories came back, however slow...and vague. It felt like it had been ages since he left, and he supposed it had been. Ten years was a good amount of time, especially when one was so far from home. "Medicines, animal hides, fresh meat. The village I would frequent even had a blacksmith."

"A blacksmith?"

"He made tools, not weapons. I should take you there, sometime."

"Sometime?" Ar'n scoffed. "We are a long way from home, Garek. I think you fail to realize that we likely will not return before the Great Journey begins."

Garek looked around, seeing that he could speak without being overheard. "We have been searching for...whatever it is that begins the Journey for a long time; Nine Ages, to be exact. I doubt, very much, that it will be found in our lifetime."

Ar'n glanced at him as they approached a newly-arrived supply ship. "I will pretend that you did not just say that..."

"Listen, I am not a heretic. Am I not allowed to have my doubts?"

"Doubts that could get you killed by the very people we serve. And if you are found out...you will be left behind."

Or so they say, Garek thought. "Gods, how many of these do we have to unload?"

"That is the last one, 'Izakee," Nazo called from a short distance away, his eyes very clearly darting back to the datapad in his hands. Well, at least the man didn't want to appear to be a liar.

"Oh, good," he mumbled.

"Then, it is on to the methane tanks."

"Is that not the Unggoy's job?" Ar'n said.

"It is yours today, Minor. Do not complain and get it done."

"Yes, sir."

The final crate found its resting place, and Garek took a moment to review their particular row of crates; four high and four long. Perfect, even, just what a superior officer wanted to see. "Well, it does not look as though you were punished."

"And your assumption would be correct. He simply wanted to know how I did it."

Garek hummed. "How _did _you do it?"

"Forerunner magic," he said sarcastically. "What?" The two soldiers who had glared at him for his remark quickly turned away. Apparently, his tone was discouraging.

Garek shook his head. "And _I _should be careful with _my_ words?"

"So, I am a hypocrite," Ar'n shrugged. "Anyway, I just waited for the Huragok to change the security measures."

"What did you discover?"

Ar'n looked over his shoulder as they entered the corridor. "Not only was a human planet discovered, but we are invading it," he said, keeping voice low. Garek had to take a moment to play the words back in his head. He'd been to a few human colonies on quick raids, but mostly things had been quiet for him. However alluring it was to finally go groundside, he had but one question.

"Why?"

"Other than humans being there, I cannot say for certain. However, that is the reason for such a large shipment of supplies. Rations, munitions, medical stuffs; everything a legion needs to move forward."

"Did you get a time for deployment?"

"Armies should be going to ground a couple of weeks from now. I see now why we are getting a crash course, if you will, through Ranger training. The courses are supposed to take months, sometimes more than a year, and here we are, doing it in mere weeks. Insanity, just to please the Hierarchs!" With that, he placed a hand over his jaws, pupils growing some. He knew he'd said too much, a little too loudly. Fortunately, Garek gave him a nod that they were in the clear.

"Anything else you could tell me, Ar'n? Whether or not _we _would be deployed, for instance?"

"No. What I got was vague."

"What did I tell you, 'Drakosee?"

Ar'n froze mid-step. That, was the voice of authority, one he both loathed, and feared. He glanced at his comrade for affirmation, and the light-skinned male just shook his head. "Uh..."

"I do not enjoy being lied to. Get your asses, in my office." The trek was quick and quiet, the two trailing their officer like whipped pups. Ar'n had gone and done it, and Garek was forced along as an accomplice. Nazo sighed once they were seated in his quarters. "Why do you continue to defy me, 'Drakosee?"

"I..."

Nazo narrowed his eyes, "You, what? Please, by all means, continue! Do not allow me to interrupt!"

"It is my fault, sir," Garek said, opting to take the fall. It wasn't far from the truth, and Ar'n just looked so dumbstruck, frightened perhaps. Just what has Nazo threatened him with? "I asked him what he had found."

"That is not important, 'Izakee. What is important is that you ran your mouth after I specifically told you to forget it. Do you think my word means nothing, do I look like a Minor Domo to you?!"

Ar'n fidgeted with his hands. "It is not something so easily forgotten, sir..."

"Oh, I have a way to ensure that you do forget," Nazo said, reaching for something on his armor. Garek turned away when he saw the hilt, Ar'n's eyes widening as an energy sword sparked to life next to his head. "Do you remember now? Hm?!"

He shied away as the sword came dangerously close to his face. It got so close, Garek could have sworn he smelled burnt hide, and for the first time, he heard Ar'n's voice crack, "N-no."

The murderous glint vanished from the Ultra's eyes, and the plasma dissipated with it. However, he and Ar'n remained face to face. "Good. Privileged information is privileged for a reason, 'Drakosee. What if you were a spy for the humans?"

"I was just curious," Ar'n stammered.

"Answer me this. Were you trying to get that information?"

"No. I just wanted to see if I could get through the ship's security."

"For what purpose?!" he suddenly bellowed, and now Ar'n knew where the reputation came from. 'The Red-Eyed Devil', he'd heard a few other Minors call Nazo, and it was clear as day before him.

"Just...to see if I could," he said, his fidgeting increasing.

"Why do I not believe you?! Why do I think you only capable of lies?!"

"Because you cannot bring yourself to trust a soul around you," Ar'n

blurted.

The fury in the male's face subsided, and he straightened. In fact, he looked incredibly confused, just as Garek did. He leaned back onto his desk with a huff, before speaking softly, "What, has led you to believe that?"

"It is the way you carry yourself, always looking over your shoulder and muttering. Do not ask how I see it, I just do."

Nazo sighed and finally sat behind his desk. "What I am about to say does not leave this room. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they said simultaneously.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." They both heard a quiet click as Nazo reached under his desk.

"You have my sincerest apologies, brothers. I had to put on a show for the listening devices. We may now speak freely. Your assumption is both correct, and incorrect; I do not trust many people, and neither of you are on that very short list. However, with time or certain tasks, perhaps that can change."

The two Minors exchanged glances, the younger of the two speaking first. "What would you have us do?"

"All I ask, is that you listen, and I know you can do that much." They nodded. "One of the many reasons we are invading this planet...is for a construct."

Ar'n tilted his head. "Do we not have several artificial intelligences of our own?"

"This one is said to be special."

"If I might inquire, just what, exactly, makes it so?" Garek said.

"That, has yet to be ascertained. One thing is for certain: We cannot allow the humans to leave the planet with it."

"What consequence would we face upon failure?"

Nazo sighed, "No consequence to you, individually. However, many will have died for nothing. That should be motivation enough." They both heard the click again, getting the silent message.

"Is our training nearing completion, sir?"

"If your brothers cannot pick up their pace, our division will receive an infraction for being behind schedule. I have noticed that you two have no friends amongst the other volunteers, yet alone acquaintances. It would be wise to at least get everyone's names. Now, get to your posts."

They stood and saluted. "Sir!"

**Date: Sunday, July 18, 2552**

**Ship Clock: 05:00 Hours**

Garek sighed as he sat up in his bunk, heaving shallow breaths as he worked through the usual steps; roll out of the bunk, suit up, armor up, and stand in line with the others. His falling behind, naturally, garnered the attention of his superior. However, the officer's behavior seemed different. The approach was slow, almost casual. The look was of concern, rather than the usual scorn. Granted, their particular entourage had done well over the past week, but that did little to sate the Minor's suspicion. "Not sleep well, 'Izakee?"

"Negative, sir," he said after a brief pause, briefly forgetting that the Ultra stubbornly remained on a strict surname basis with his troops. Garek abided by it, respecting authority, but he didn't really agree; the man requested they all get well acquainted, for unit cohesion, but he had yet to follow his own suggestion. No one knew much of anything about their superior, and rumor had spread like wildfire.

Nazo stopped before him, keeping his stance loose, relaxed; it looked out of place. Nazo was just too much of a military body. The man lived and breathed functional, rather than casual like the rest of them. Perhaps that came with age and experience. "And why is that, if you do not mind my asking?"

"Visions," Garek muttered.

"What did you see?"

"Terrible things," he said, shaking his head.

"Explain. I must know if you need to go to the infirmary."

Garek looked around, hearing a few of the others beginning to wake. As sluggish as he was, he'd been able to beat the others out of bed? Perhaps today was a free day? He couldn't remember, as all of the recent days had meshed together. Wake, drill, eat, exercise, drill again, sleep; such were the days. "Not here."

The Ultra frowned, clearly a little suspicious himself, but his demeanor remained casual. The male gave a single curt nod, and turned to make his leave. "I shall be in my office, if you wish to speak further."

"I will be but a moment, sir," he affirmed, clipping the helmet to his belt and going about fixing his bunk. A disturbance at his back told him that Ar'n had awakened, and he was likely to blame for that.

"Hmph, I never would have thought that he actually gave a damn about us, yet alone our dreams," the Minor said with a yawn, fixing his bodysuit; he seemed to never take the thing off, unless in the obvious event they showered. Everyone had their preference, he supposed.

"You have arisen early, on a free day no less!" The remark was short and more than a little curt, though he hadn't intended it to be so.

Keeping his eyes averted as he made his bunk, waiting for the quip to come.

"Well, it was quite difficult to sleep with your incessant yammering. What _did _you see, anyway? You sounded horrified."

"Perhaps another time, brother. Regretfully, there are a few tasks I must take care of before I am truly free for the day." With a sharing of nods, he departed, leaving his friend to fume and ponder on the horrors he had witnessed in the night.

He was unsure of the amount of the officer's time he had taken in his explanation, but he supposed it mattered little; the Ultra had wanted to hear, so he heard every last grim detail; fire, brimstone, death, and destruction. Corpses, young and old, strewn about like morbid ragdolls. A once shining metropolis, brought to ruin under heretical fire. And, in the defining moment of it all, a being of great power, had wiped it all away in a fire of its own. A fire so pure, it had to have been a god. Of course, he dared not share that last detail. "That is all?" Nazo said; the man almost sounded bored.

"Yes," followed the short reply, the Minor looking greatly confused by his own story. It had felt so real, and yet, it had been completely absurd and vague. He knew not what to make of it.

"Do you have these dreams often?"

Garek shook his head. "This is the first time."

"Hmm. I am at a loss for words, 'Izakee. It sounds too surreal to be anything other than a nightmare."

Garek sighed. "I know what I saw. It looked- no, it _felt _so...real. Why do you care?" he suddenly said after a pause.

Nazo turned to the viewport and crossed his arms. "I care about my warriors, 'Izakee. You are not the first to be seated here with some kind of problem."

"Problems like this?"

"No, but problems nonetheless. I suggest you go to the infirmary and have yourself looked at."

"I doubt they can help me."

"Just go. Be back in the barracks by 1300 hours," Nazo said shortly, continuing to look at the passing stars.

"Yes, sir." Garek paused at the door. "May I ask why?"

Nazo sat at his desk and folded his hands. "I have an announcement to make to all of you. I will also need to speak with you alone a second time."

Garek nodded and exited, finding Ar'n leaning against the wall outside. "You did not roll back into your bunk? That is surprising..."

"Hmph! You must not be aware of just how long you were in there. I

was nearly worried that there was some fraternization to report!" Garek rolled his eyes, knowing all too well that the miniscule man was anything but one to report such offenses. "I jest, of course. And here I thought that you had a sense of humor. Three hours, Garek. Must have been quite the tale to spin to hold Nazo to a seat for so long..."

Garek sighed. "You would not believe me if I told you. He certainly had trouble...I am having trouble believing it, myself." Ar'n took on a stance that only challenged him to try. "The other races slaughtering females, children, everyone. And then...they glassed it."

Ar'n halted, frowning. "Glassed what?"

"I am not sure. The sky was a brilliant red, but...It could have been Sangheilios. It was hard to tell, with the amount of chaos."

"Oh, please. I do not like the other races any more than the next person, but they are our allies. If you go on to say humans were fighting alongside us, I will not believe you."

"There were humans present, yes. Fighting by our side? It was hard to tell."

"That does sound like a nightmare," Ar'n said lightly.

"Do you think this to be funny? Dream or not, I could not make this up. Not even if I wanted to write a book. As absurd as it was, I got a clear message. We should only trust our brothers."

"You say that as if I would even think of trusting a Jiralhanae, or any of the others, for that matter." They began walking along the corridor again, Ar'n turning to say, "I do not think you should worry about it. It was the first time you had this dream, aye?"

"Yes."

"Then, it was probably just a dream. Did anything else of...worth happen?"

"Well, before I woke up, thisâ€|flaming avian creature came screaming at me."

Ar'n raised a brow, "A flaming bird? What have you stolen from the infirmary to see such absurdities?"

He ignored the obvious kidding jab. If Ar'n wouldn't believe him, he wouldn't blame him for it. "I just have this feeling that it will happen, some day. And before you ask, no, I have no idea what the bird is or what it is supposed to mean, if anything at all."

"Hmph, it sounds to me like you are simply stressed. If so, get in line. These past few weeks have been, almost literally, hell."

"I quite enjoyed the simulated vacuum exercises. Fun, seems like an appropriate word," Garek remarked, changing the subject.

"Hmm, and so were the scrimmages that followed. Still, it was like

Academy all over again, only shoved into weeks instead of months."

"It was far from terrible, I thought. Quite invigorating, actually."

"Surely, you jest! All I have had time to do is drill, eat, and sleep...if you could call it sleep."

"Having some issues yourself, eh?"

"No, the opposite! It is like being comatose every day for ten hours."

"Ten hours?" Garek scoffed. "Consider yourself fortunate. I am content if I get five."

"Five hours of rest? How do you do it?"

Garek shrugged. "I suppose I have gotten used to it." He slowed as they neared a gravity lift. "I have to go to the infirmary."

"What? Why?"

"Nazo wants me to take a psyche evaluation," he said, shaking his head. "I believe I will do nothing more than waste their time."

"See? Even you do not believe what you saw."

"That is not what I meant. Everything that happened...I could feel it as if I was there; the heat, the blood on my skin...the pain."

"You felt physical pain?"

"I can still feel it," he murmured, stepping into the lift and leaving a confused Ar'n behind. Once he had reached the medical ward, he stopped a passing nurse. "I need to see the chief medical officer," he said quietly.

"You must be Minor 'Iz-"

"Do not speak my name."

Her smile faded as she nodded. "Right this way." She gestured to the door before curtly turning and walking away.

"Ah, Minor 'Izakee. I shall be right with you," the doctor said. There weren't many female combatants in any Covenant armada, as most were tasked with spreading the bloodlines back home, but this fleet seemed to have a wealthy supply of female doctors. He supposed it was better that way; a male doctor was doomed to the worst ridicule, and even abuse, treatment worse than what most Unggoy received. He caught himself staring at her. She was a beautiful woman, not much younger or older than him, but that wasn't what had really caught his attention. Where have I seen that particular stripe pattern before, he thought. "Do you always mumble your thoughts?" she said wryly.

Garek rubbed the back of his neck. He really needed to learn how to not work his mind and mouth in unison. "No, ma'am."

She snickered and shook her head slightly. "Please, have a seat. Your commander passed the details on to me...I do not know if there is anything I can do. I was trained to treat wounds, not mental instability."

"I am not unstable..."

"You see? I do not even know the correct terminology." She paused, scratching at a mandible with a sigh. "Do you have these dreams often?"

"Define 'often'," he said after thinking for a moment.

"Do you have them every night?"

"No."

"How many times in a week?"

"Three, sometimes four, and they get progressively worse with each occurrence."

"Could you elaborate on that, please?"

"They become more vivid, more...real." She tilted her head questioningly. "I can feel everything that happens. I mean, actually feel it; cuts, burns, broken bones, and I can still feel it all when I awaken."

She shook her head with a frown. "The best I can do is give you some medication that the older warriors take. Some have flashbacks, causing them to suffer from insomnia. It helps them rest, and they tell me it works," she clarified to Garek's confused look.

"As much as it irks me to admit it...I think I may need it." She nodded and typed something into a datapad. "This is confidential, yes?"

She nodded. "Only you, I, and your commander will know."

"Why does he need to know?"

"It is mandatory," she said. "I do not like it any more than you do, but that is how it is."

Garek sighed. "What do I need to do?"

She stood and scanned a nearby shelf, grabbing a small vial and retaking her seat. "Just put two or three drops of this in anything you drink before you go to sleep."

"How long will this last?"

"This vial should get you through a month, maybe two if you do not use it often." Garek nodded as she handed him the vial of dark green liquid. "Come see me again if you continue to have problems, or if just does not work for you. I will look into this, and see if I can

find any other remedies."

"All right," he said, standing. "Er...forgive my manners. I never asked your name."

"My name is 'Telam."

"I, uh...I meant your given name."

She turned her gaze up with a strange look. "My mother named me Deza."

He bowed his head in greeting, and much to his delight, the gesture was returned to him. Perhaps she wasn't quite as reserved as other females. "Garek. What was that look about?"

"Usually, the warriors that come here would sooner try to bed me, than ask my name."

"Well, I am not like the others."

"Hmm, indeed." She suddenly smirked. "The others are not as shy as you, either."

"Shy?"

"There is nothing wrong with being shy. You are who you are."

"That is veryâ€¦open-minded of you, although I disagree. I just...I do not meet new people often enough, I suppose."

"There is merit to that, too. The less people you know, the greater friends you will have. Well, you should get back to your barracks," she said, indicating the time before returning her attention to the datapad on her desk. Garek looked at the vial again, nodding as he placed it into a pocket.

**Ship Clock: 13:05 Hours**

"Attention!"

Everyone straightened as Nazo strode into the barracks. "At ease. Now, recite the mantra."

They all bowed their heads with a salute, speaking in unison. "Glory and Honor guide our Ascension."

"Very good. Due to our current situation, you will have one week of free time instead of a ceremony. I will fill out the proper forms. If any of you have any questions you do not mind sharing in front of your comrades, speak up now. Yes, 'Drakosee?"

"Why are you such an asshole?"

Everyone blinked at him before Nazo chuckled. "I had to be. However, you will find that I am much more agreeable now that your training is complete. Yes, 'Stronasee?"

"I am simply curious as to what we shall be doing once our week is up."

"I had thought someone would ask that question," Nazo sighed. "A few of your comrades already knew what our fleet was preparing to do," he paused to glare at Ar'n. "However, since I know that they did not tell you, I shall. The fleet is getting ready to invade a human colony."

"When do we go?" Orna 'Stronasee said eagerly.

"_We _will be arriving on the planet after the primary invasion force."

"So, we are going to be cleaning up whatever they leave behind?"

"That is the idea, 'Stronasee. This group will be sent on seek and destroy missions, as well as setting up ambushes on human convoys while Special Operations teams search for a relic."

"A relic?" Z'aes 'Xaseree said. "As in...a gift from the Gods?"

"Precisely, 'Xaseree. I was hoping that the Supreme Commander would choose us, but he said that you were not prepared for such a demanding task."

"That is a load of shit," Orna grumbled.

"I agree, 'Stronasee. And, whenever you are around me, try to refrain from using such profanity."

"Why?"

"I do not like it. In my eyes, it shows that you lack discipline."

"As long as we are not around you?"

Nazo rolled his eyes. "If I am not present, how can I care? If I _am_ present, mind your tongue. Your squads will be formed later, dismissed."

"_Had_ to be an asshole? He still is," Orna scoffed after he had approached Ar'n and Garek.

"If the boot fits, one must wear it, Orna," Z'aes shrugged. "I say we celebrate tonight."

"I cannot," Garek said. "I have a few errands to run," he finished to their questioning looks.

"Ar'n?"

"I have nothing better to do..."

"Are you sure, Garek?" Orna said.

"I am sure."

"You have errands to run? All night?"

"Not all night, no. I am just tired, going to hit my bunk early."

"You are absolutely certain? We were going to try and steal away for a much needed release, with some females, I hope. I have seen enough masculinity to last a lifetime. Your loss, brother," Z'aes finished with a shrug after Garek shook his head.

3. Chapter II: Truth in Madness

Chapter II: Truth in Madness

**Location: Seeker of Truth, Fleet of Particular Justice**

**Date: Sunday, July 18, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Ship Clock: 19:30 Hours**

Garek stared at the vial of medicine between his fingers, pondering if he should actually make use of it. The color resembled some sort of bile, and it smelled absolutely terrible, but if it would ease his mind enough to not have such lucid dreams, he supposed it was worth a try. Three drops fell into his drink pouch, grimacing as the water within changed to match that sickly green. A deep breath, and down it went. He coughed back a gag and tossed the empty pouch into a refuse bin when the main door opened, laughter catching his attention. Ar'n and Orna had clearly been drinking, but Zaes...that scowl nearly looked permanent, even behind the band on his face. "What happened to you? Did someone poke you in the eye?" he said, a little amused himself.

"One of them struck me," Z'aes muttered.

He held up a hand, and the laughter ceased. "Well, Zaes, if a someone says no...they likely mean it."

The fellow lowered his hand, finally, and the sight of the bruise made Garek blink. No swelling, fortunately, but the violet around the edges of his iris indicated that a blood vessel had been ruptured. "Hilarious, but that is far from the truth. Not once did I look at the one that hit me."

"Do you know why they hit you?"

Z'aes shook his head. "I was simply talking to one of the nurses, when this orange-eyed," he trailed off with a grumble, rubbing his face. What he'd said was likely unsavory and disrespectful, but he seemed to have the decency to not say it aloud. Garek likely would have bruised his other eye, if he had. The Minor continued upon request, taking a few moments to describe the woman. Garek couldn't help but feel ire for his friend's obscenity, but it was much more amusing to see Z'aes so upset over something so small. "You know who she is? Tell me, so I might set her right."

"The chief medical officer, Deza 'Telam, and you are going to nothing about this." The Minor simply huffed and made for the door, vengeance clear in his gait. Something told him, that with a bruise like that,

her strike had also floored him, if only in surprise. Garek hummed loudly, causing Z'aes to pause. "Perhaps I should allow you to go. If you wish to make a fool of yourself and lose to a woman, who am I to stop you?"

"You think a _female, _could take me down?"

"Oh, I would pay to see that," Orna said with a smirk, Ar'n nodding in agreement. As the conversation was none too discreet, the others couldn't help but overhear and whispers of a bet spread rapidly. Small coin purses found separate piles, favor quickly going to Z'aes. The older fellows could only scowl at their younger counterparts, finding the situation loathsome. Garek could not say he blamed them, but everyone had their own view on what was fun, and what was pure debauchery.

Garek was quickly volunteered to be the neutral party - the House, as it were - and he opened the case next to his bunk, retrieving a large hand-crafted wooden box. Being the neutral party, he counted from each purse ten single-credit coins, leaving the rest in their sacks. "When the winner is announced, I shall count it and hand it out myself." He was glad that every purse was light; no one wanted to lose their earnings on some...trivial entertainment. The box heavy with coin, he locked it and returned it to his trunk. "Good luck, brother," he yawned, stripping down to nothing and rolling onto his bunk. "She looked like a strong one."

Z'aes scoffed. "I shall return in a few moments."

"No. You shall wait until tomorrow, as I will need to make the proper arrangements to reserve a ring. I will _not _have you go and assault a woman. If you step through that door, I will chase you down that corridor, and wail on you. Naked. Now, get in your bunk, lest I have Orna sit on you and _pin _you to it. I think I speak for everyone when I say, I would rather bear witness to your loss. Perhaps you will learn something." Orna said something along the line of, 'You do not want that', but it was hard to tell. The medicine had had enough time to work through his body, and sleep clouded every sense.

_ "Oh, no," _Garek thought as he looked around, seeing a familiar scene. He cursed as his legs began to move him along a blood-stained corridor against his will. _"How many times must I go through this nightmare?"_

"Hello?!" he heard his voice call warily, raising a Covenant weapon he didn't recognize. His pace slowed upon hearing a Sangheili woman crying around a corner. His gaze met a pair of deep azure eyes as he rounded it, the rifle raised.

He saw recognition spark in her eyes as he lowered it. "Garek?"

_ "How does she know my name?" _he thought as his body returned the embrace she gave. "Where are the others?" he whispered.

"Is that all you care about?" she said, shoving him away bitterly. He turned around, hearing loud footsteps approach. "I knew it was wrong to choose you." He turned back at hearing the new tone in her voice. His eyes widened, seeing a Jiralhanae where the female had stood. "And now you will die by my hands, heretic!" His dream-self panicked, firing the weapon erratically as the ten-foot-tall alien charged him.

It growled as a luminescent round struck it in the gut, but it quickly closed the distance and pinned him against the wall. "Any last words?" it said, raising a knife to his throat.

"Go to hell, Brute," he heard himself growl.

It bore it's teeth, bringing the knife back. "Yo, ugly," a new voice called, causing it to pause. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't kill my friend there." Garek looked over and saw a fairly tall- almost equal to his own height- human in full-body armor standing there with a rifle raised, aimed directly at the Jiralhanae's head. _"Friend?" _he thought. _"I would not be caught dead with a human..."_

"You will die with him, human," it snarled.

The dark-skinned human smirked behind his clear visor and dropped the rifle, pulling out his own knife. "What're you waitin' for? Come at me, bro." Garek wiped his face, feeling warm blood run down it as the two charged each other. _"This human is either brave or stupid. He has no-" _His thought was interrupted as the Jiralhanae howled in agony. Garek watched as the human yanked the knife from its side and jammed it into the beast's skull, breaking the handle off afterward.

_"I stand corrected. Hmm, this part is new," _he thought as he heard himself impatiently say, "What kept you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry if I was havin' fun with ya little ape friends outside," he said. "Listen man, we need to get outta here."

"I am not leaving her behind," Garek heard himself say, picking up the strange rifle and reloading it. "If she burns with this planet, then so will I."

The human shrugged indifferently. "It's your funeral."

_"They are, truly, honorless wretches," _he thought as the human ran back outside, the sound of its gunfire following it. He looked through a window as a shadow cast the corridor in darkness. As the ship blocked the light from all three of Sangheili's suns, he caught sight of a flaming piece of debris flying under it. _"Wait," _he thought as the debris turned toward the building and let out a screech that was audible over the war raging outside. He raised his rifle as it sped at him, the temperature in the room quickly rising as it did. It let out another scream as it hit the window, engulfing everything in a bright-red flame.

Garek shot up in his bunk with a cry. His body shook with anxiety and a burning sensation that he couldn't quite understand. A quick glance around told that, fortunately, he hadn't disturbed a single body. All he could feel was frustration as he laid back again. "That only made matters worse," he grumbled.

"'Izakee?" A whisper at his bedside, and light from an open door down the hall. It could only have been Nazo. "Are you all right?"

"I am fine," he lied. He heard Nazo huff as his hoofsteps quietly padded across the room. _"It did little to help, but it is definitely potent," _he thought as he quickly drifted back into sleep. Fortunately, the dream didn't repeat. He couldn't help but wonder

what it meant. The woman, the Jiralhanae, the human. That creature. None of it made any sense. When he awoke again, he found himself alone in the barracks. He sighed as he slipped into his bodysuit, seeing the clock read 1030 hours.

"'Izakee," Nazo said from his office door. He knew exactly what the Ultra wished to ask him, so he simply gave a "One moment" gesture before continuing to dress. What he didn't know, however, was what he was supposed to think about the visions that kept haunting him. Why were they absent until now? Were they premonitions, or simply nightmares? Was he going mad? The Gods surely had an explanation, one that he wasn't yet ready to understand. Perhaps it was a test of his faith?

His system diagnostic finished and kinetic barriers on standby, he strode for the Ultra's office, still unsure of his mental state. Perhaps Deza was right, perhaps he was unstable. It just wasn't prominent until now. He blinked, the older man speaking before he'd even taken a seat, "...instructions, 'Izakee. Did you follow them?"

He shook his head. "Aye. Down to the final detail, and I still had the vision. It was worse than before. I swear I felt my hearts stop before I woke up."

The man hummed. He was clearly skeptical to the last bit, but said nothing against it. "I do not know what to tell you, other than to keep taking the medicine. However, that is not the real reason I wished to speak with you. You are being promoted to Major. Someone has to lead your squad, 'Izakee."

He frowned. Him, leading a squad? "Why? I do not have any experience, leading _anyone_. You have seen my service record, and you know that."

"That does not make you a bad choice. Choose your squadmates wisely, and victory will come with ease."

The Ultra wasn't going to take no for an answer, then. He thought about it for a long moment, considering who would best fit into which roles. Ar'n was a must, as he doubted the small male would last very long without him. He just needed two others, and he had an idea as to who those would be. "I already have them picked," he said at last.

Nazo chuckled. "I figured as much. Oh, one last thing. I will pretend that I did not hear about that bet you all made last night. You may go now." Nazo stood, much to his surprise, to shake his hand. It was uncharacteristic to the Ultra they had grown to know. Perhaps it was just a formality. He gave instructions to head to the Armory at once to have his shoulder pads replaced and armor systems upgraded, so his rank would be fully recognized. Upon exiting, they found Z'aes mumbling incoherently as he paced back and forth. "Is there a problem, 'Xaseree?"

"What? Oh, no sir," he said quickly, continuing to pace.

"Major, handle this while I take care of your details."

"At once, sir." He watched his friend for a few moments. Z'aes looked

well and truly troubled, and concern rose in his gut. "Z'aes." No response. He decided to try something. "Stop pacing for a moment and look at me. Do not make me repeat myself, Minor." He frowned briefly, the air of authority not...tasting right on his tongue. It was nothing compared to the gravel-in-gut tone that Nazo was able to dish out, but the man had been an Ultra for a long while. He supposed he would get used to it.

Nevertheless, Z'aes' attention had been stolen. "You are not a higher rank than me, Garek."

"As a matter of fact I am, as of a few moments ago. I am just as surprised as you. Would have given _you _the position, myself. Now, what is wrong? You can tell me, brother."

"I am just thinking."

"Is challenging a female making you nervous?" Garek said lightly, crossing his arms.

"What? No, I just cannot figure out why she did what she did. It is bothering me," he said, continuing his pacing. If that was all that was bothering him, he should just ask the woman. He made the point aloud, and his friend just scowled. "I would sooner share a bed with Orna than speak with her again."

Neither turned as the door opened with a quiet chime. "You wished to see me, Major?"

Z'aes froze as Garek turned around. Word spread fast, it seemed. Of course, the medical personnel were likely the first to receive news of promotions, along with all officers. "I did, Deza. My friend here would like to ask you a question."

She scoffed. So, their feelings were mutual. One might think they were married, if neither belonged to the military. "Him. Make it quick. I have more pressing matters to attend to, than to answer _your _questions."

"Why did you hit me?" he mumbled.

"My nurses are _not_ here for you to take advantage of."

"I was not taking advantage. Besides, I knew her before either of us were assigned here. I was courting with her before I graduated from Academy. Our last time together was graduation night, so when I found out she was assigned to this shipâ€¦I wanted to talk to her. Is that so wrong?"

"That is touching and all," she said half-heartedly. "But, make sure she is not on her shift next time? I understand that there was something else you wanted to ask me." She turned around before Z'aes could utter a single syllable, "I accept your challenge. Meet me in the arena in five minutes. Oh, and Garek, come see me after I am through with this...fool. I received your commander's message."

"Yes, ma'am." She nodded with a smile before leaving. "Well," he said, patting Z'aes on the shoulder. "Good luck. I think you may need it..."

Location: Sparring Arena****

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Garek said, looking to both Z'aes and Deza with his right arm between them. After receiving simple nods, "You know the rules. Three rounds, the best of two is the winner. Begin!" He sharply let his arm fall and hopped from between them to the edge of the ring. They were on one another immediately, a flurry of fists, claws, legs, and curses. Z'aes was stronger, but he never thought Deza would be so...nimble. She was clearly doing nothing more than evading and taking hits as she saw fit, wearing on Z'aes' stamina. He knew already that his friend would lose, but that made the fight no less interesting.

"What is going on here, 'Izakee?" Tajo suddenly whispered from his side, which was cause enough for him to flinch. Oh, how he loathed when people sneaked up on him.

"Gods! Do not do that," he sighed. "Just a sparring match, your Excellence. There is nothing wrong with that, I assume?"

"No, I suppose not. Who is in the ring?"

"Z'aes 'Xaseree and Deza 'Telam," he said, intently watching the ring.

Tajo frowned, "As in, Chief Medical Officer Deza 'Telam?"

"The very same," Garek said with a nod. "May I ask you a question?"

"You may," he said, watching the two circle each other in the ring.

"Would you like to place a bet?"

"Oh. I do not gamble, but I do not mind if you do. It is your money, after all," he finished as Garek was about to speak.

"I wish my commander shared the same views."

"Nazo?" Tajo snickered. "His behavior is a façade. You should try to catch him when he is off-duty sometime. Try to keep that between you and I, hmm?"

"I shall consider it."

"I received a message this morning that you were promoted."

"Do not remind me," he muttered, turning his attention back to the ring. "I am going to assume you have a reason to be here, your Excellence?"

"Yes, and you may drop the formalities, Garek. How long have we known each other?"

Garek scratched at a mandible before answering, "Ever since I was assigned to the 349th."

"About two years. And, do not mind me; I just have a class to teach."

He spared a glance behind him, seeing no one new among the crowd. "Oh, they should be along in ten minutes. You know that I always arrive ahead of my charges."

"Of course. That is plenty of time, then."

"The Minor, he is yours?"

"Aye, Z'aes 'Xaseree." At the second mention of his name, Z'aes spared a glance toward him and the Field Marshall, which would be his downfall. There was a collective _"Oh"_, Deza's hoof connecting with the side of his head. Not enough to floor him, but a sweep of his stumbling legs took care of that. She put a knee on his spine, grabbed his left arm, and yanked it back at a painful angle. Garek swore he heard the Minor's elbow pop out of place.

"Submit," she said, pinching a nerve in his wrist. He cried out but shook his head, causing her to pinch harder and twist his arm. "A broken arm is _not_ a fair trade for your foolish pride, 'Xaseree. Submit."

"I will never submit to a female!" He threw his right arm out behind him, which she easily grabbed and repeated what she did with the left, eliciting another pained shout.

"Submit, damn you," she growled, frustrated at his refusal to yield. Garek was very faintly aware of the door opening at the back of the room.

"'Telam! What the hell is going on here?! If you had a point to make, it has been made, now remove yourself from that warrior!" There was no chime, there were no cheers. He shook his head when Z'aes finally stood, cringing as the pop echoed over the silence. A dislocation, indeed. "Who organized this madness?! Step forward and face me, this instant!"

"This is your business, Garek. I suggest you do what an officer must, and handle it yourself," Tajo whispered. The man was right, even if he didn't like it. He took a breath and stepped toward the new voice, standing at attention.

"Your Excellence! I organized this sparring match. These two sought to feud, so I commanded that they settle it honorably."

Supreme Commander Thel 'Vadamee crossed his arms and frowned. "You doknow that the medical staff is not permitted to take part in _any_ combat situation, correct?"

"Your Excellence, it was just a-"

"_Is that correct, Major?_" In the few times he had actually seen Thel about the ship, never had he seen him so furious.

"It is, quite correct, your Excellence."

"'Telam, get back to the infirmary. 'Izakee, 'Xaseree, come with me." As they followed him through the ship, Garek began thinking about his dreams. _"Who was that female, and how did she know me? Why was Sangheilios under attack by Covenant forces? Why did a _human_ save my life, and what, in the Gods' names, does that creature symbolize?"

_He was brought back to reality by the Supreme Commander snapping his fingers at him. "Are you paying attention, 'Izakee?"

"Yes, your Excellence."

"Repeat what I just said." He remained silent, his mandibles tight with guilt. "I thought not. 'Xaseree, get back to your bunk. Your superior's words will decide your punishments." Z'aes quickly made himself scarce, clearly ashamed that he'd lost. Thel sighed as he leaned back. "What led you to believe that a sparring match between your Minor and one of _my_ medical staff was appropriate, 'Izakee? A simple trading of words is not warrant enough."

"Well...I do not know if this is true, but 'Xaseree told me that she struck him while he was talking with one of the nurses, one he said to be courting with. He challenged her to a spar, which she accepted and I allowed. I know they are not allowed into combat, but I saw no harm in a simple spar."

"Your ignorance matters not to me. Your behavior in the time aboard this vessel is unbecoming of a Major, yet alone a fresh Minor. It would be extremely shameful to be promoted and demoted in the same day, do you not agree? Keep in mind that this is your _only_ warning. Ultra 'Bezatee will receive the details of your punishment, 'Izakee. Now go, I have a ship to command."

Someone stopped Garek upon exiting the office. "Is there someone else in there, sir?"

Garek turned, recognizing the voice. "No Rotje, he is available. However, now may not be the best time."

His face hardened for a moment, "Oh, hello Garek."

Garek crossed his arms. "You need to get over...whatever it is that has you so agitated."

Rotje frowned. "I am not agitated." The whole situation looked familiar, and all he could do was sigh. He had nearly lost the man's friendship once, and he wasn't about to take his chances a second time.

"No, you are. However, could you forget about that for a moment? I have something to show you." His change of tone caught Rotje's curiosity, and the male nodded; as far as they'd fallen, they would always be friends, and brothers, first. As they walked through the corridor, Garek's mind went back to the dream. He shook his head slightly, trying to think of other things, but failing. "Wait here." He waved Z'aes off before the question rose, counting out Deza's share of the winnings and beckoning Ar'n to follow him. "Rotje, this is Ar'n 'Drakosee. He is going to be the scout in my squad."

"So, you are Rotje 'Tsomee," Ar'n said, crossing his arms. "Garek has said a lot about you. Tell me, how much of it is true?"

Rotje cut his eyes at Garek. "That depends..."

"Did you really break into the Quartermaster's office?"

Rotje sighed indignantly, but there was a hint of gratitude in his

eyes. Gratitude for words unspoken. They both knew they missed those times, but it was far behind them. To go back would only risk tearing them apart. "Out of all we had done, you just _had _to tell _that_ story? You embarrass me."

"It is the best story, Rotje," he countered, making his way for the medical ward. "Besides, I am not a good liar."

Ar'n scoffed. "You simply need to try harder. I could teach you..."

"Perhaps some other time," he finally said as they approached the medical ward. "I need to speak with 'Telam."

"She has been expecting you, Major," the nurse said, keying the intercom at her station. "Major 'Izakee and two Minors are here to see you, ma'am."

_ "Who are the Minors?"_

"'Drakosee and 'Tsomee," Garek said to the nurse's expectant look.

_ "Send them in, Yuri." _Deza smiled from her seat as they entered. "What can I do for you, Major?"

Garek retrieved a small pouch from his armor and placed it on the desk. "Your earnings," he said to her raised brow. Her face turned to disdain, and she shook her head. "I am not leaving here with it. What you decide to do with it is your choice. I know not if you are already acquainted, but this is Rotje 'Tsomee," he said, gesturing to his left. Rotje, this is-"

"Deza 'Telam," she interrupted. "Charmed."

Rotje offered her a small bow, and Garek had to suppress the urge to roll his eyes. It was the same bow the man gave to anyone he saw as attractive. He'd gotten it, as well as a few others back home. It was a polite gesture, sure, but it was an obvious one. Perhaps he _had _learned something from Ar'n. "Likewise, madam."

"Could you two Minors step out, please? I need to have a word with the Major alone." They nodded and exited. She searched through her datapad for a moment, looking up when she found the notes in his file. "So, how did you rest?"

"I slept well, but I still had the vision. There was a female who knew me by name, this time...and a human as well. There was still some pain when I awoke, but it is nothing more than a dull ache. Oh, I also had this." He revealed the scar on his neck where the Brute had clumsily dragged the blade across his skin in the dream. "There was blood on my hand, so I suppose I did it myself."

"Would you like to keep taking the medication?"

"Yes. I have not felt this good in a while."

She nodded and took notes as he stood. "Thank you for checking in, and for the credits, I suppose. I will think of something to do with them. If you have any trouble, my door is always open."

"Until next time, then," he said as the door opened.

"Walk the path, Major."

"Right," he mumbled upon exiting. "Go on, Rotje, say it."

"Why did you not tell me that our chief medical officer was so..."

"Beautiful?" Ar'n said.

"Aye, that."

Garek rolled his eyes. "Go talk with her, if you think you could get anywhere. Just be mindful of what you say. There is a fire in her, and I believe Ar'n would agree on that."

Rotje scoffed. "You think that I am actually attracted to her?"

"I do not think you are, no. I know you are. I also know that bow, and what it means. I meant it. If you think you could get somewhere with her, go back to her office." The man looked stung at being called out, but of course, he said nothing. Garek wouldn't fault him for not bringing it up.

"Just try not to end up like our friend Z'aes," Ar'n interjected. "A fire in her, indeed. I do hope you saw that kick. It was...well, like her, it was beautiful."

"I do not know, Garek. I am like you: no good at this sort of thing."

"Rotje, many other males would rather be lonely than be caught with a doctor. I know you do not share that ideal, nor do I, and Ar'n...he probably cannot care less." The latter shrugged when he looked over.

"What do you think I should say?"

"Well," Ar'n began before Garek could speak. "Do not simply come out and say it. Like Garek said, just talk, and when you feel the time is right, be honest with her. What?" he finished when they looked at him strangely. "I may be young, but I have had my share. Make of that what you will."

"I did not say it was bad advice. I cannot bring myself to disagree, as a matter of fact. Rotje?"

"Perhaps later. Tajo has had us busy for the past few days. I have a feeling that something big is about to happen."

Garek and Ar'n exchanged glances, the latter shaking his head. "I am tired of staring down the commander."

"You two know something."

"No," they said simultaneously.

Rotje sighed and shook his head. "I need to get back to my post. It was nice to meet you, Ar'n."

"The pleasure was all mine. See you around, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Rotje said over his shoulder with a shrug.

"He is still upset about your transfer."

"That is not the only reason, but I am glad to not be the only one to notice," Garek said as they continued alone. They found Nazo waiting upon entering the barracks, taking note of the other's hanging heads.

"Where is it?" he said, looking directly at Ar'n.

"Where is what?"

"Do not play dumb with me, 'Drakosee. Where is it?"

"I honestly do not know what," he was cut off by Nazo's fist connecting with his throat.

"Someone rummaged through my office and I know it was you, 'Drakosee! Where is the module you use to bypass security?!"

"I do not use one, and I swear on my father's grave that I did not go through your office," Ar'n said between coughs.

"Liar," he shouted, dragging Ar'n up by the collar on his armor and pinning him against the wall. "I will have that vile tongue if you," Nazo was stopped short by Ar'n's head smacking into his own, the force causing them both to fall to the floor.

Ar'n snarled as he pinned the Ultra down, activating the energy dagger on his wrist. "I should kill you right now for spitting on my father's good name. My execution would be a fair trade for your pathetic life." He looked back when someone took hold of his forearm, stopping his lunge.

"Ar'n think about what you were about to do," Garek said lowly. "A life for a life is never a fair trade, because in the end, nobody wins. Now, sir, what happened?"

"I will explain if you get this lunatic off of me."

"Orna, get him out of here," Garek called.

"Do not touch me," Ar'n spat as Orna moved to grab his other arm. "This is not over. I do not give a damn who you are!"

Nazo sighed when they had exited. "You need to keep your Minors under control, 'Izakee. If the Supreme Commander were to see that," he trailed off, holding his aching head. "Right, the office. Just take a look."

Garek frowned as he observed the mess; datapads were scattered across the floor, every chair looked as if it had been thrown into the wall, and Nazo's personal terminal was torn to pieces. "I can safely say that Ar'n did not do this."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Well, to start, you were in your office when we left the barracks, and we just now got back; you can ask Rotje 'Tsomee, he can confirm our alibi. Also, if he were looking for something truly important, he would just hack your terminal. No, _this _is vandalism. Have you gone through your belongings?"

"No. I had just finished shouting at the others for this mess when you entered. Why would someone want to go through my things? I have nothing to hide." Garek frowned at hearing a quiet shuffle and activated his HUD, watching the motion tracker. He blinked a single eye at Nazo upon noticing a third blip, the latter giving a barely noticeable nod. Nazo sighed and walked over to his messy bookshelf, suddenly kicking out with his left leg. A Sangheili grunted as his active camouflage deactivated. The operative tried to run, but stumbled when Nazo kicked him in the back of the leg. "Well, what do we have here?" he said as he placed a hoof in the small of the soldier's back. "Remove his helmet, 'Izakee."

Garek scoffed as he looked the soldier in the face, noticing that several teeth were missing. "I know who can identify him if he refuses to talk...but, you do not want to know who that might be."

Nazo sighed heavily. "Get 'Drakosee in here."

"Ar'n 'Drakosee? Do not bring him in here," the soldier said with a slight stutter.

"Oh, so you _can _talk. What is your name and who is your commanding officer?"

"Seor 'Albosee," he said, lowering his head in shame. "And my commanding officer...is Kilo 'Vernomee."

"I see. Major, would you excuse us? Remain outside and tell anyone that asks that I am busy."

"Sir, I do not think that would be wise." The Ultra gave him a glare. If looks could kill. "As you wish." He quietly hummed a battle hymn as he thought of possible reasons why a Special Operations Minor would utterly destroy an Ultra's quarters. That musing quickly came to an end when a new voice called him by rank. "Yes?"

"Your commander requested to see me."

"Ah, Acting Commander 'Vernomee. One moment, your Excellence." He chanced a peek through the threshold, and the Ultra looked up, wiping his hands.

"You may step back in, Major. I need a witness for this." He glanced in the soldier's direction as he approached Nazo, but quickly turned away after seeing blood dripping from his mouth and how his mandibles hung at awkward angles. That form of...haughty discipline was strikingly familiar, he thought. "So, you are behind this mess, 'Vernomee? If you wished to know something, all you needed to do was ask. I have nothing to hide from Special Operations."

"Your knowledge of the construct we seek is no secret, and quite frankly, you are not supposed to."

"The Supreme Commander obviously disagrees with you. If his intention is to have all of his warriors know what he is sending them into, so be it. I am not sure how that meaning was lost on you. However, I have a feeling in my gut, that there is more to this mess. You want something, so name it."

Kilo glanced at Seor and shook his head. "I understand that you have a tech expert in your division?"

Nazo crossed his arms. "Yes, Minor Domo 'Drakosee. What about him?"

"His tampering with the security is also no secret, and the Council does nothing about it because they believe he is testing himself," he finished as Nazo was about to speak. "What I want from you, 'Bezatee, is for your Rangers to aid my operatives on the ground. Not all of them, mind you, simply your pick of the litter."

Garek nodded when Nazo looked to him. "Who will we be working with?"

"Four of my best, Major. You will meet with them as we are heading to our objective. 'Albosee, do not expect sympathy from me; you brought this upon yourself. Thank you for handling him, 'Bezatee."

"It was no trouble. I can see that your soldiers are nothing to trifle with. He did not even flinch as I struck him."

Kilo smirked. "As I said before: the best. Good day to you both."

Nazo frowned as he looked at the mess once more. "Would you mind helping me?"

"Not at all." Garek's eyes fell upon a datapad that lay separated from the others. He felt a smile grow on his mandibles as he examined it; for what he reason, he didn't know. "Hmm. Is this your family, sir?"

"What? Give me that," Nazo said, yanking the datapad from his grasp. Garek watched a smile form, but it vanished just as quickly as it had gotten there. "Yes, it is." He sighed as he placed the picture face-up on the desk. "We sired the boy and would have been wed, but I left for service on the day of the ceremony. I never got the chance to tell her I was leaving." He sighed again and looked Garek in the eyes. "I do not want you to tell anyone of this."

"You have my word." Garek looked to the picture and back to Nazo before nodding. "I can see the resemblance. Does he know?" The Ultra simply shook his head; it was the most troubled he'd ever seen the man, which wouldn't be saying very much. Even so, he couldn't help but feel pity. "He has the right to know, Nazo. He is a child no longer, and we both know that he would not use you as leverage to get ahead in life. It would be unlike him. That, and he loathes you, with absoluton. Aye, now would definitely not be the best time."

"I just wish I had not left them the way I had, in that wretched place. Once he has calmed, pass on word that I wish to speak with

him. Privately," he finished after a long pause. They said nothing more as they continued cleaning the office. Garek even found a hand-written letter to the female, but said nothing as he gently placed it on the desk on top of the datapads. Nazo silently nodded his thanks as Garek turned to leave, the latter returning it.

Garek bumped into someone as he walked through the door. "Sorry, excuse me." The male spoke softly, asking him to wait. He hadn't realized that it was Ar'n, and he chided himself again for allowing his mind to wander so far away from the here and now. "I see your mood has improved, brother. Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "Orna may not be very bright, but he certainly has a way with words."

He hummed, noting a certain soberness. He was speculating, of course. If they had found a private spot, good for them, but he knew not to raise questions. That would require a level of trust that they just didn't share. Even then, that was a question one just did not ask; what happens behind closed doors and all that. "Come, Nazo wishes to speak with you." He stuck his head into the office, finding Nazo staring at the letter with a frown. "Sir? 'Drakosee would like see you now. May I stay, just in case?"

"You may. 'Drakosee, come in and have a seat." Ar'n kept his eyes averted; looking at anything in the room sans the person he wished to see. "This is not about what happened out there, Ar'n." His gaze snapped onto Nazo at the use of his given name. "This is about youâ€|and your mother."

"What does she have to do with anything?"

"Tell me, do you have any memories of your father?" Nazo said, ignoring the question. The younger male shook his head in the negative, both of them staying silent for a few minutes. "I know this will be difficult to swallow, Ar'n, but I must be honest with you. I am your sire. Take this picture, and you will see."

Ar'n took the datapad, his eyes widening as he recognized not only his mother and his younger-self, but the other male standing between them. "No," he murmured. "No, this cannot be."

"I am afraid it is. I am sorry," Nazo finished quietly.

Ar'n tossed the picture on the desk as he rapidly stood. "You are absolutely right, you are sorry! Do you have any idea, any idea at all, just what we had to go through in that Gods-forsaken place?!"

"No, I do not. But, it was not my choice to leave!" The Ultra was suddenly on the defensive and Garek moved to get half between them, in case things turned ugly. Fortunately, no one was armed and all armor systems were offline without their helmets to complete the connection. "You know that all capable males have to serve this Covenant. I was called into service before I could be wed with your mother."

"It matters little now, does it not?! She told me that my father is dead, and in my mind, that is how it is going to stay!"

"Ar'n, be reasonable."

"With how you have treated me, you expect me to be _reasonable_?! Orders I will follow, but this...I refuse to believe these _lies,_"
he finished loudly, gesturing to the datapad. "I mean no disrespect, but you have some nerve!" The Minor slammed on the door lock and stomped to...only the Gods knew where.

"That...went better than I expected. Sir, I," the Ultra held up a hand, silencing him. The man rubbed his forehead and remained silent, defeated in his effort for honesty. "I shall be with my squad, going through basic formations and the like. A refresher, to keep their minds where they need to be. If you need me, just send for me. Sir." He saluted and left the man to his woes.

Orna, Z'aes, and Ar'n were murmuring amongst themselves in the corridor, likely talking about what had just transpired. "Come, brothers. Unit cohesion practices, maneuvers. Z'aes, I want you to draw a few assault patterns in your mind and relay them to me." Anything to take your minds off of Ar'n's business, he finished in his head, leading them for an empty observation deck. They followed without question, seeming to know his intention. He decided he would tend to Ar'n later, if his friend proved to remain aggressive.

"Z'aes, upload any strategic options to my datapad. I shall review them in a moment. Orna, listen to whatever he tells you." He received short, quiet affirmatives, but Ar'n gave him a strange look. "Ar'n, with me. I need a word." The Minor nodded and followed him into a corner, nothing about his features save for an ugly frown. "Listen, that must be difficult to swallow all at once, but I believe him. I need-"

"Why do you believe that...that _imbecile_?"

"Do _not_ _interrupt_ me," he hissed, sparing a glance at their comrades. Neither had looked up. "I need to know that you will be able to focus, with that weighing on you. I would never forgive myself if any of you perished on our first deployment. Will you be able to focus, Ar'n?" The male's shoulders relaxed, keeping his gaze averted as he nodded. "Sorry for snapping. One other thing. That..._friend_ _you_ made in Academy? Our squad will be working with his, so please, mind your tongue. Will you be all right?"

"I am fine, Garek. Thank you."

"Excellent. Let us join our brothers, plan for the battle ahead. Z'aes! Datapad, please." He was sure Ar'n had been truthful, that he had been through more demanding trials. In time, perhaps he would know of them. He quickly reviewed what his strategist had gone over, liking what he saw. Operatives may have been extraordinary on their own, but with the formations and maneuvers Z'aes had formulated, he thought that, perhaps, they would at least be a force to be reckoned with.

4. Chapter III: Simplicity Redefined

Chapter III: Simplicity Redefined

**Location: Phantom dropship, en route to landing zone in the outskirts of New Alexandria**

**Planet: Reach**

**Date: August 21, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Local Time: 04:26 hours**

Garek was grateful that Ar'n had allowed him to share a personal moment before this deployment, just as Ar'n was grateful for him making the offer. It had put the Minor's mind at enough ease to get him truly focused. It had been incredibly awkward, naturally, but they had both agreed that the intention was correctly placed. His mind had been cleared, as well, but that only brought a wariness of the battle ahead. He didn't even know what their objectives were, and that was troubling for reasons all its own. "What, exactly, will we be doing?" he said as they flew over several skyscrapers, more than a few with smoke billowing from shattered windows. The scene was as grim as it was beautiful, but this was not after a battle. No, it was only just beginning.

Kilo regarded him for a moment before looking back at the passing city and nodding. "For now, we will be setting up jammers to assist our brothers in confusing the fleeing humans. Your team, however," he paused, silently judging the three Minors. "Will be eliminating anything that would be a threat to us. Is that clear?"

"Yes, your Excellence."

"Good. Now, I suppose it is time for brief introductions. That is Seor 'Albosee, Anor 'Etsosee, Zero 'Insoree, and Razo 'Nezomee." Each simply nodded as they were mentioned. "Perhaps you would like to introduce yourselves, as well?"

"I am Major Domo Garek 'Izakee, and these are my Minors. 'Drakosee, 'Xaseree, and 'Stronasee."

"Their given names?" Razo demanded rudely.

Garek grunted his disapproval, that operative's remark rubbing him wrong way. It may have been for documentation purposes, in case anyone fell in battle, but that could have been done politely. Being "the best" brought forth an ego to match the reputation, he supposed. He would say nothing, however, as 'Nezomee was an Ultra. "Ar'n, Z'aes, and Orna; same order as before, sir." The operative nodded curtly towards them, the aforementioned three doing the same.

"Sirs?" the Unggoy co-pilot called from the front of the Phantom.

"What is it?" Kilo demanded, looking at the viewscreen.

"Thermal imaging is picking up several human armor units, your Excellence," the lead pilot, a Sangheili Minor, said.

"Anti-armor or anti-air?" The pilot said he couldn't confirm, as he simply didn't know the difference; it was all the same to him, as he needed to be more familiar with immediate threats, like other

aircraft. Garek beckoned Orna, the resident expert in demolitions and nearly anything anti-vehicle, into the cockpit to identify the units.

"Those are anti-armor vehicles, pilot. _However_, a skilled operator could bring down an aircraft. You have nothing to worry about, though. We are much too far away." That did nothing to erase the uncertainty in the pilot's face, but that wasn't anyone's fault but his own; Orna did as he was asked, and the rest of them were just along for the ride. Garek would have blamed it on having an Unggoy co-pilot, if he were that delusional about the runts.

"They will be in our way on the ground, so be ready 'Stronasee," Kilo ordered as they reentered the troop bay and sat down.

"I am always ready, your Excellence."

"Sixty seconds from the first drop point," the Minor called.

Though the Minor couldn't see it, Kilo nodded and secured his helmet to his head. Garek had heard stories of why the humans, and Covenant races alike, feared the Spec Ops. Their armor alone was terrifying; the helmets were smooth and curved, but possessed three "horns" where the soldier's snout and mandibles would be. The eye covers, much like an Ultra's ceremonial helmet, glowed a bright blue. The colors they wore were a dark gray, much like steel, with the color of their rank as the trim and white, maroon, or gold armor details which indicated what task force and unit they were with; this squad in particular bore the maroon markings of a group simply known as Alpha-7. "My brothers, it is time to do what we do best: strike fear into the heart of our enemy and cause disarray among their ranks. Remember what our wise commanders have taught us and what the previous generations have done to get our Covenant where it is today." Once the Phantom was hovering over the drop zone, "Disperse, you know what to do. Do not let us down, Rangers."

Garek secured his own helmet, a shiver running the length of his spine as his shields rose. He blinked, eyes adjusting to the sudden addition of elements to his HUD. The condition of his shields, charges for his weapons, motion tracker, range finder. As long as he had been in service, he still had yet to get used to it. The atmosphere in his suit became separate from the outside world, and he switched to the external comms link. "See you on the ground."

The Spec Ops Major's body language suggested that he was smirking beneath his helmet. "No, you will not." With that, he dropped through the dropship's gravity lift and disappeared into the night.

Garek turned upon hearing Ar'n huff. "What?"

"Nothing."

"No, you have something to say Ar'n, so by all means, continue."

"Fine," he said, crossing his arms as best he could; the chest pieces they wore made it rather difficult. "Every time I even think about 'Albosee, I have to fight back a rage. So you could only imagine what this Phantom ride was like for me."

"You do hate him, truly."

"I prefer _despise to the point of inflicting bodily harm_."

"Hmm. See if you can lock that away in your mind, because we are stuck with them. I, too, hope this is a temporary pairing. All of that time spent getting to know _our_ brothers will be wasted if we do not survive this night." They were all in agreement to that sentiment. Of course, there were Rangers in their lance that they loathed, but they were preferable to these operatives; Rangers were supposed to be efficient and fast, as Spec Ops were, but the latter had a reputation of ruthlessness, recklessness. "Check your equipment one last time. We shall drop soon." He entered the cockpit once more, silently watching the humans' movements on the multiple viewscreens before him, trying to place them to any kind of pattern - be it attack or retreat. His musing was interrupted when the pilot told him that they were nearing their drop zone. "Keep us at four hundred meters and open the side doors."

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name, Minor?" he said, using a less commonly-used Sangheili dialect.

The Minor tilted his head before glancing at the Unggoy opposite him. "Rypa 'Cazaree," he said with a nod. "And yours, sir?"

"Garek 'Izakee. Might I ask why you decided to become a pilot?"

"Hmm. Well, I have always had a love of aircraft; if you can name it, I have probably wanted to fly it. At first, I was disappointed when I was assigned to this Phantom, but that quickly became satisfaction once I actually sat in the pilot's seat. A few have called me an honorless swine," he paused to chuckle. "But I just tell them 'Well, this _honorless swine_ just delivered you safely to your mission area. Under heavy fire without a single casualty, I might add. Have a nice day'."

"Someone has to do it, and I would much rather have a fellow Sangheili taking me into battle than a few clumsy Unggoy."

"Exactly, and thank you. Twenty seconds to objective. Tell the _nishum_ that I send my regards, sir," he finished, reverting back the common Covenant dialect.

"Stay out of trouble, 'Cazaree." Garek pounded his left gauntlet on his right shoulder pad, getting his squad's attention. "Prime your thruster packs. We are going in via combat jump."

"Why would we need our thruster packs in the gravity lift?" Orna said, not hearing the doors opening until the wind came rushing into the troop bay and the doors locked into the open position with a loud _click_. "Oh."

"Weapons at the ready. Jump on my mark." He waited for the violet lights above each door to change to cyan; the signal for 'clear to exit'. "Go!" The seemingly dark sky suddenly became illuminated by multiple burning buildings and the lightning from the raging storm as he exited the cloud cover. He activated the thermal imaging

technology in his helmet as rain violently splattered against his visor, making visibility next to nothing. He looked down and activated the thrusters on his back, seeing a rooftop rushing up to meet him. A grunt left his throat as he landed on the slick concrete. Not good for a first combat jump, but it could have been worse._
Hearing similar sounds over the torrent, he activated his comms and selected Nazo's personal channel. "Team Two is on the ground and mobile. We are on a rooftop approximately...three hundred-forty meters due East of the Team One. Moving to assist now."

"Copy that, 'Izakee. Move quickly, but do not directly intervene unless they are compromised.""

"Understood. Ar'n, get us out of this damn rain," he ordered over the squad's closed channel, gesturing to the electronically locked door leading to the building's interior.

"This should take no more than a moment...we are in." As they stalked the dark and narrow hallways, the scent of blood and scorched flesh filtered through their helmets. "It looks like the Jiralhanae have already swept through here. Ugh, I am _completely_ sealing my helmet filters."

"Get used to the stench, Ar'n. Our weapons are going to produce the same result. Oh Gods," Garek trailed off, catching sight of a human, or what was left of it. He stepped over as much of the blood and entrails as he could before reaching down and closing the human's eyes. "May the Gods have mercy on you and show you the Path of the Enlightened," he whispered. "You did not deserve _this_."

"Did I just see that?" Z'aes thought aloud. "Garek, what the hell was that?"

"All that have passed, no matter how despicable, deserve respect."

"Not that. I mean that prayer, I have never heard it before."

"I pratice the Old Beliefs, Z'aes. I do not care if it is 'heresy'. It is what I was raised to believe, and I will respect my parent's decision on the matter. I am sure they taught me these things for a specific reason. Do any of you have a problem with that?" They all gave him negative affirmations, save for Orna, and he turned his head pointedly to the Minor.

"I," he trailed off, hanging his head. "I do not know what to think about it. It may be heresy, but...I cannot help but be curious."

"Then we shall talk more about it later. Not a word to anyone, clear?" Once the three nodded, "Good. Come, we have a job to do. Ar'n, scout ahead."

"At once, sir. What should I do if I find something?"

"Maintain comm silence. If you find something, just wait for us to catch up. Z'aes, what should we do in case we are ambushed in these hallways?"

The Minor hummed as he scanned every inch of the walls. "Find some

cover and fight back. Very basic, I know, but what else is there to do in that event? I have heard that humans travel in groups, much larger than ours, but we would have the upper hand in terms of skill and weaponry. I mean, of course we would. We _are_ winning the war, after all." After descending several floors and finding nothing but plasma burns and bullet holes, Z'aes spoke again. "What type of establishment is this? I have seen several signs, but I cannot read their language."

"This is a hospital, and we are on...the third floor."

"You are just full of surprises, Ar'n. What is next? Are you going to tell us that some human infantry is coming this way?" Orna said lightly.

"About that..." Ar'n led them over to a window and indicated a column of armor, comprised mostly of Warthogs, but with a few Scorpions mixed in. "We cannot get through this on our own."

Garek scanned the row of windows and took note of how the benches were placed in front of them. Not much cover for their large frames, but at the range between them, it would matter little. The white of the walls, coupled with the dark windows, would hide them well enough until fire was exchanged. "I believe we can."

"What do you have in mind?"

Garek pulled the Type-50 SRS rifle from his back. "It is risky, but it should work. I am not sure how fortunate you all feel, but today...I feel like a gambler." He couldn't quite see their faces, but he knew he'd worried them. Perhaps he really was going mad.

**Remnants of 4th battlegroup, 22nd Armored Corp, in formation before the New Alexandria Central Hospital**

**Local Time: 05: 27 hours**

"Yo, Frankie!"

Corporal Franklin Nichols twisted in the passenger seat of his Warthog to see who called his name. "What do you want, Derek?"

"When are we movin', man? I'm about to go off and fight these fuckers myself."

"Patience, trooper. We'll be Oscar Mike soon, just gotta wait for the Major to pull his head from his arse."

"I'm just sayin', Sarge. We know the Covies are up the street. Why don't we just take 'em out?"

Franklin watched as Gunnery Sergeant Wilfred Moore, an Englishman, climbed from the driver seat of his 'Hog and approached the rear of the one beside his, which had Private First Class Derek Rowitz on the gun. "Listen 'ere, Rowitz. If you wanna go out there and get yourself killed, be my guest. If not, shut yer mouth and wait like everyone else. I don't really give a damn about you, kid; you're just like all the others. Too stupid or cocky to see this war for what it really is."

"I..."

"Just shut up and be patient."

"Gunny, we got Covies in the hospital, third story!"

"What're they doin', Mendez?"

"They're just...watching us."

"Delta-259, let's teach 'em that staring's rude, shall we?"

_ "You got it." _ Specialist Austin Mendez watched through his binoculars as one of the Elites tilted it's head at him as the three tanks aimed their turrets at the hospital; it almost looked smug, as if to mock him. He opened his mouth to speak, but Gunnery Sergeant Moore fell to the ground dead before he could give the order to fire.

"Sniper, cover!"

_ "Delta-259, what's your status?" _

"Major, sir," someone said into their comm; Mendez recognized it as Cpl. Nichols. "We're pinned down by Covi sniper fire and Sergeant Moore got wasted, over."

_ "Well, get the hell outta there! You have permission to move the column." _

"Load up, and make it quick! Let's move!"

"Orna, get ready." Garek quickly left the room as every vehicle sans one Scorpion began moving. "Ar'n, let us get into the street to help Z'aes."

"Did you get the kill?"

Garek scoffed. "Of course I did. The human bore this insignia." He sent a picture to Ar'n through the Battle Net, the Minor humming as he looked at it.

"A _Gunnery Sergeant_. Not high in rank, but an officer nonetheless."

"Hmm. One down..."

"Billions to go," Ar'n said lightly as they exited into an alley, only to snarl and raise his Type-51 Carbine at a civilian frozen in front of them.

"Tell it to get out of here."

"What?!" came the hissed reply.

"Tell it to run, Ar'n. We are here to fight the enemy, i_not/i _civilians." Ar'n lowered his rifle and barked at the human in its language, firing at the ground in front of it to drive the point home. Garek pulled his friend aside to let the human run past, the

latter tugging his arm free once it was gone.

"Someone _will _hear about _this_."

"Go ahead and tell someone, I care not. There are more urgent matters to attend to." Ar'n grunted and began moving for Z'aes' position, Garek close behind. "How much further?" he whispered.

"About one hundred-twenty meters until they reach our trap," Z'aes said. "Are you sure about this?"

"No. All we have is the element of surprise."

"Element of surprise? They know we are here," Ar'n stated.

"Yes, but they do not know exactly where we are, or how many of us there are."

"Twenty-five meters."

"Orna, prime the charges," Garek said, receiving an affirmative hand signal. He eyed the fifteen charges placed throughout the street. They were spread out for maximum damage; three of them were designed to send out an electro-magnetic pulse, while the rest were meant to destroy the vehicles. He knew that this trap would not destroy every vehicle in the column, but he knew that Orna and Z'aes could take care of that detail while he and Ar'n handled the infantry.

"Detonate!" His actions became mechanical as ten of the fifteen vehicles became disabled, and then flaming wrecks within mere milliseconds.

"Grenades first, go!" Garek popped around the corner in a crouch and tossed a plasma grenade into a group of humans, the others doing the same from their positions. Time seemed to slow as he began to down each gunner, fuel rod, concussive, and the luminescent rounds of a Carbine taking care of what he missed.

"They are retreating," Orna called, as if it needed saying. For affirmation's sake, Garek was grateful. Two of their Warthogs remained, and though pocked and scarred as they were, he could still hear the faint rumble of their primitives engines.

"Let them, conserve your ammunition. 'Vernomee."

"Yes, 'Izakee?"

"Have you finished with the jammer?"

"The Huragok are just finishing up. Are we clear to move on?"

"Affirmative. The human's armor has been wiped out."

"Excellent. We no longer need you to assist us... I suggest you get to these coordinates; that squad would greatly appreciate a helping hand."

"Received. Moving now."

Ar'n scoffed upon seeing the waypoint on his HUD. "How do you suggest

we get there? It is on the other side of this city. Rubble, wrecks, human reinforcements. Need I remind you that we are not an army?"

Garek pointed to an undamaged M831 TT. "Ask, and you shall receive."

"No. No, no, _no_."

"I suggest you start walking, then," he quipped, gently removing a corpse from the driver seat.

Ar'n closed his eyes with a sigh, seeing that Z'aes and Orna were heading for the vehicle without hesitation. "What if someone finds out?"

Garek removed his helmet, clipped it to his left hip, and smirked. "No one will, Ar'n. We shall abandon it before we get to the waypoint. Get in the passenger seat and keep your rifle ready." He took a moment to ease into the vehicle. It was uncomfortable, his legs were already protesting, and his head rose above the windscreen. It still beat walking over that much ground to likely find that their time would have been wasted.

"I suppose a little heresy never hurt anyone," Ar'n mumbled once he settled into the transport.

__**Location: KerÅ¼let a Dics**__**Å'sÃ@g**__**, New Alexandria**_

__**Local Time: 06: 47 hours**__

"We must go on foot from here. Hmm," Garek said, looking over the many buildings he could use for cover. "We should set up in there. It stands the tallest among these others, providing a clear view of the waypoint. We can assist our brothers from afar."

"How about that one?" Orna pointed. The building was only half as tall as the one he'd chosen, and twice as demolished; most of the face and wall on their side was missing, but it was dark and shrouded by smoke. "It is closer to that courtyard over there," he added, and Garek knew his intention; he wanted to be closer to not only his allies, but his enemies. He could respect that.

"Very well. Quickly. We have wasted enough time talking, let us get in there and aid our brothers." He gestured for Ar'n to peek a break in the courtyard's wall, the Minor waving for them to pass. They crossed the street in two pairs, Orna and Z'aes going first to clear the building if they had to. "Cover my back, Ar'n. Follow five meters behind me." He received only a nod, and ran forward. No alarm was raised, their presence still unknown. He ordered Z'aes and Orna to remain a floor below them, in the odd event that the humans had been crafty. "Listen. Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Exactly." He sunk into a half-crouch, stalking the corridor at Ar'n's back, glancing through doors as they passed. Things were silent by no means - it _was_ a warzone, after all - but the lack of small arms fire below was cause enough to make him wary. They set up

in separate rooms, keeping prone to further mask their silhouettes.
"Do you see anything?"

"No. One moment," he said, quickly jolting back to spot he had previously scanned over with the scope on his Carbine. "The humans are holding them...prisoner? Oh, please, give me the order to open fire on the sick bastards..."

"_Negative_. You will hold your fire until I say. Wait one...found them." It was a despicable sight, indeed, seeing comrades lined up like that. Perhaps more despicable than that, however, was the fact that whoever was in charge had ordered the surrender. The Covenant, surrendering? Oh, the humans would enjoy that small victory, wouldn't they? He scanned the line of helmets until he found the red of a Major Domo. He nearly squeezed the trigger, but his grip faltered. He recognized that face. "No," he whispered.

5. Chapter IV: Ties That Bind

Chapter IV: Ties That Bind

_**Location: KerÅ¼let a Dics**__**Å'sÃ@g**__**, New Alexandria**_

**Date: August 21, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Local Time: 06: 47 hours**

Tavo 'Rezakee watched helplessly as his Unggoy and fellow Sangheili were executed one by one. As the human finally reached him, he stood silent and defiant, just as the others had done. "Where are the jammers?"

Tavo, having taken a short course in the humans' common language - English - replied, "You will get nothing from me, _vermin_." The human made a facial expression that he couldn't decipher; he had always had trouble with that.

"We have ways to get the information we want. Do you see this?" it said, pulling out a strange-looking firearm. "This is a tranquilizer gun. It fires a needle full of sedative; some powerful stuff, too. So, what's gonna happen is, I hit you with this, we take you to a facility not far from where you'll be stripped down to nothing and beaten repeatedly, and we'll ask you questions between those beatings. Do you understand, or do I need to break it down for you?"

Tavo snorted. "It better bring me down the instant it enters my bloodstream." He kept that same defiant stance as the human raised the new weapon, even knowing that should the human be right, he would never see his family or friends again; he _could not _see them again.

"I'll see you in-" the human was cut short by a purple beam of energy passing through his torso, the portion that Tavo knew held their heart and lungs. He felt something poke him in the abdomen and looked down, realizing that the human's finger had clenched on the trigger as it fell. He instinctively pulled the small dart and tried to toss it, but his legs suddenly went numb. Seeing an opportunity he didn't

have before, he attempted to crawl away with his hands as the remaining three humans took cover from his savior, one he knew to be a fellow Sangheili wielding a Beam Rifle; how he knew, he couldn't be sure.

"I am glad that Garek can't see this." After an undertermined amount of time, he reached the fountain in the courtyard's center, leaned his back against it, and tried to watch the battle as best he could. "I have failed myself...but more importantly, I have failed you, brother. I'm sure Hell awaits...I just hope that you will not hold this against me." As the sedative finally began taking its toll on his mind, he muttered a short prayer. "Zuda, Oa gotre xon napou."

Garek couldn't believe what he had just seen or heard. His brother, whom he hadn't seen in over a decade, was not only on this planet, but less than three hundred meters from him. "Zuda, Oa gotre xon napou." He slowly lowered his rifle as the words - words he was sure had remained unspoken since the Covenant began - came through his helmet speakers.

"What did he say?" Ar'n said, genuine curiosity and concern in his voice.

"He said..." Garek shook his head; he still couldn't believe it. "He said 'Zuda, my life and the honor of my family lies in your hands'. I'll tell you what that means later, we have to get down there and help him."

He was surprised when Ar'n didn't protest and nodded. "You get him out of there, I'll cover you."

Garek jumped through the hole in the wall, exiting the dark room they had used for cover. He finally noticed the red haze in his vision and the knot in his stomach. "Focus, Garek. If you allow your rage to get the better of you, you'll get everyone killed." He shook his head as he sprinted over the rubble lining the courtyard, blindly firing at the humans' cover with his Type-25 DER as he went. Within seconds, he was kneeling next to Tavo, silently thanking the Gods that he was unharmed. He grunted as 7.62mm rounds pinged off of his shields, but he lifted his brother onto his shoulders with no trouble. The fire ceased as his shields hit the ten percent mark, again thanking the Gods. He heard the humans shouting at each other in their strange language, but he paid it no mind as he ran back the way he came.

"Garek, get in!" He turned to see Z'aes skid to a halt a few feet from him in the Warthog they had taken eariler, and he gladly set Tavo in the passenger seat before he and Ar'n joined Orna in the rear. "Human armor, hold on!" They all jostled in their seats as the vehicle drove over several piles of debris, narrowly avoiding machine gun fire. "We're almost clear... got-" Z'aes was cut short as an explosion hit the ground directly in front of them, sending the vehicle tumbling. Garek watched as time slowed, his world spinning around him until he hit the ground and his vision went black. He groaned as he awakened, the sound of several terminals beeping filling his ears. He cracked open his right eye and quietly cursed as his left refused to follow.

"Ah, Garek. You're awake."

He looked to his left as best he could; his whole body ached from that crash. "Deza? Is that you?"

"It is, and I'm not alone. Your squadmates are here as well."

"Where? My vision is...not exactly as good as it should be at the moment."

"I would imagine not. The explosion that caused your crash also knocked your helmet off, and you hit the pavement head first. In case you were wondering, your left eye is swollen shut...but you still have it."

He chuckled hoarsely. "Good. What about Tavo?"

"Tavo?"

"Uh, Major Domo 'Rezakee?"

"Hmm. He's still unconcious...the sedative that Ar'n told me they had given him is indeed quite strong. We can't estimate when he will awaken."

Garek slowly nodded. "At least he's alive," he said lowly.

"Wait, you said 'Rezakee? He is-"

"My brother, yes. He's the second of three, myself being the youngest...Gods, am I sore. How long have I been out?"

"About...fourteen hours. We're all surprised you survived; when we got you back to the ship, your vitals flatlined a few times," Ar'n said before turning to Deza. "When will he be cleared, ma'am? Our commander wants to know why he did what he did, from him personally."

"Right now, since he has nothing but a few scrapes and bruises. You got lucky, Garek. You all got very lucky."

Garek rubbed his face and winced as a claw rubbed over the tender spot of his left side. "One of you is going to have to show me the way. I can't see a damn thing."

"What do you mean?" Deza said, gently grabbing his arm.

"Everything is out of focus...like I'm underwater."

"You must still be suffering from a small concussion. It will go away by the time you reach your commander's office."

"Oh," was all he said before limping towards the exit, Ar'n directing him as he moved.

**Location: 482nd Rangers barracks, E-company of the 78th Airborne section, Officer's Quarters**

**Ship Clock: 19:24 hours**

"I took this risk because I had always been told to never leave someone behind if I have the chance to save them," Garek finished, finally drinking the water that Nazo had offered him when he arrived. The Ultra seemed to consider this for several minutes before nodding.

"That is acceptable, 'Izakee. Not only did you save your brother's life, but you preserved your family's honor in the process. I will...overlook some minor details that 'Drakosee gave in his report." Nazo leaned forward, his face serious. "As for those details...I never want to hear anything like that happen ever again. Am I understood?"

"Yes sir."

Nazo nodded. "Go get some more rest, allow that swelling to go down. I'll have another assignment for you soon." As Garek got to the door, "Oh, and 'Izakee? Good work out there. I've heard, and seen, worse of first-time leaders."

"Thank you, sir." Garek made his way to the mess hall, noticing a few Sangheili steer clear of his path or simply gawk at him. Quickly growing agitated, he stopped and looked a Minor in the face. "What?" he spat.

"I...", he paused to clear his throat. "I heard about what you did down there, sir."

"What about it?"

The Minor averted his gaze, as if looking at Garek would get him killed. "Why did you do it? His actions brought shame to our unit."

"I can safely tell you that they did not. His squad may have been apprehended, but the humans got _nothing_ from them. I watched the entire thing. Now, if you would like to discuss this further, give me your name because I have other places to be."

"Um...Rha 'Kozoree, sir."

"Well, 'Kozoree, I am Garek 'Izakee. I will come find you when he awakens and you can tell him what you just told me. He may not like it, but I'm sure he would appreciate your opinion."

"'Kozoree, leave him alone. I don't think he likes you talking about his brother that way," a General said as he approached.

Rha tilted his head at Garek, who simply nodded. "I'm sorry," he said before quickly leaving.

"Thank you, sir. I-"

"Please, call me Eaite."

"Thank you, Eaite. It took a great deal for me to not punch him. What did he mean when he said that Tavo brought shame to your unit?"

"Your brother didn't bring shame to our unit." Eaite looked in the direction Rha had gone and snorted. "Minors and their rumors. Where do you have to be at this moment, Major? I would like to have a word with you."

"Actually, I was just going to the mess hall to spend time with my squad mates... and maybe have a few drinks." Garek chuckled dryly. "It was a long day."

"Hmm, I can see that. You wouldn't mind if I joined you?"

"I suppose not," Garek shrugged, continuing to move again. He looked around upon reaching his destination, trying to find his friends among the crowded tables.

"Over here, Garek," Ar'n called out, waving from a table in the back. "Sir," he said, saluting as the General took a seat next to Garek.

Eaite chuckled. "Oh, sit down. I'm not here to harrass you."

"Oh. Well, what's your name, then?"

"Eaite 'Atuggee, and you must be the Rangers who saved Major 'Rezakee. You four have my thanks, and I'm sure Tavo feels the same. So...what do you all want to drink?"

"Q'osa," Ar'n proclaimed.

"A whiskey man, are we?" Eaite said. "You, 'Izakee?"

"The same...though not as much as much as he wants."

"Lightweight," Ar'n snickered.

"I'm just not a heavy drinker, and maybe I like not waking up to a hangover," Garek said bitterly.

"Relax, 'Izakee. He was just giving you a hard time."

"I'll relax when that poison enters my stomach," he quipped, putting a hand to his still-aching head.

"Fair enough. What about you two?"

"I don't drink," Orna said, receiving strange looks from the rest of the table. "Erm, alcohol makes me do things that I would rather not talk about; it makes me a different person."

Eaite nodded and turned to Z'aes. "Hmm...I think I'll take some wine."

"Wine? Strange request from a Minor."

"What? I can't have my alcohol and enjoy it, too?"

"I didn't say that, it's just rare for a Minor to want wine. Bartender, one bottle of Q'osa and a bottle of T'jozae," Eaite called.

"T'jozae? That's high quality stuff," Z'aes said, clearly surprised.

"I only drink the best. While we wait, why don't you three introduce yourselves?" Once they had done so, "Ar'n, Orna, and Z'aes... again, you have my thanks. Tavo 'Rezakee is one of my best Majors." The General sighed. "I would hate to lose him at all."

"Well, you're welcome," Ar'n said. "Both of you."

"Eaite, do you know if Kilo 'Vernomee's squad made it back?"

"No, Garek, I do not. I'm just a General, I don't get information on the Spec Ops unless some are assigned to me. I do, however, know the pilot that sent you in. A funny Minor, he is."

"Indeed. So, he might know something?"

"He would be your best bet if you really want to know what happened to them."

"Do you know where I might find him?"

They all looked up as the bartender set their order on the table. "He's likely still in his Phantom. In an invasion, a Phantom pilot's work is never done."

"Hmm." Garek paused to pour some whiskey into the self-cooling glass in front of him. "I just want to know if they made it. Can't have one small success be ruined by a colossal failure such as that."

"You care about what happens to a team of Spec Ops? You didn't even know any of the members on that team, correct?"

"Of course I care, they are fellow Sangheili. Knowing them or not doesn't matter to me."

Eaite smiled. "We need more troops like you, Garek. I can safely say that more than half of the people in this room wouldn't think twice if someone at the table across from them died in battle."

"I know," Garek sighed. "What happened to our people?"

"What do you think happened?" Eaite mumbled. "I must be going. Some of my troops just made it back from battle and I would like to know what happened."

"It was an honor to meet you, Eaite."

"The pleasure was all mine. And, for the third time, thank you."

"Quite the relaxed General," Ar'n commented, setting his drink on the table. "So, what will we do next?"

"I have no idea. Nazo just said that he would have another assignment for us soon," Garek shrugged. "I wonder if Tavo is awake yet..."

"Deza said she would let you know as soon as he was," Ar'n said. "You

were speaking with Nazo at the time."

"I'm going to check on him."

**Location: Medical Wing 2-F**

**Ship Clock: 21:46 hours**

"Excuse me...Yuri, right?" Garek said when he had entered the waiting area, the nurse nodding. "Would you happen to know if Major Domo Tavo 'Rezakee has awakened?"

Yuri began going through holographic screens at her terminal with practiced speed. "He has, follow me please." Garek swept his eyes around the room, looking at each wounded soldier and seeing one common emotion: bitterness. "Major? This man would like to speak with you."

Tavo's mandibles spread apart slightly in disbelief before they formed a smile. "Garek? I had no idea that you were assigned to this fleet. How have you been, brother?"

"I've been well, until recently," Garek said, revealing the left side of his face.

"What happened?"

"This is what I got for saving your ass," he said lightly, a frown replacing his smile as his brother tilted his head. "Do you not remember anything?"

"I remember getting my troops killed, after that, nothing," he said, hanging his head in shame. "So, it was you?"

"Yes, and I heard your prayer over comms. Apparently, I wasn't the only one." He placed a hand on Tavo's shoulder.

"Zuda."

"Indeed. Tavo, I have a question to ask you." Once Tavo nodded for him to continue, "Do you think you brought shame to your unit?"

"Of course I did. You know how people who have been captured and rescued are treated. My actions have brought shame to our name and I no longer have honor."

"You don't believe that, Tavo."

"You're right, but that's what everyone else will say," he said, keeping his gaze averted.

"No, they won't. _My _actions preserved your honor, your right to continue serving."

"Really?"

"Yes. I spoke with your General, 'Atuggee, and he told me that you have his blessing. You have nothing to worry about."

Tavo sighed in relief. "Good. But, even with that, things will not go

well for me."

Garek chuckled. "You always were pessimistic, brother."

"Hmm."

Seeing that Tavo's mood wasn't going to improve for the time being, he decided to change the subject. "So, what ship are you assigned to?"

"I was assigned to the Ardent Prayer." Garek blinked, remembering what he had heard of the ship's destruction. "My squad was sent out just before it was boarded...Eaite and I may be the only survivors."

Again, Garek decided to change the subject. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, but 'Telam wants me to stay here for the time being, let that filth pass through my system before releasing me."

"I'll talk to her, be back in moment." Garek walked toward Deza's office and stepped in. "Deza."

She looked up from her terminal; he could see his brother's information on the screens. "Garek, what do you need?"

"I would like to talk to my brother, in private. Would it be alright if we walked around the ship for a while?"

"Of course. I was about to release him, anyway. How are you doing?"

"Thank you, and I'm still sore...but, I'll manage."

"And your sleep?"

"It's improved, haven't had the vision all week."

"Good. You must excuse me, Garek. I'm sure you saw that I am very busy at the moment."

Garek nodded and exited without another word. "Tavo, come."

"Finally." Once they were outside, Tavo nudged him in the side. "Brother, are you-"

"No," Garek said, cutting him off. "She's attractive, but not my type."

"You say that about every female I ask you about. I'm beginning to wonder if you're-"

"I'm not like you," he said teasingly, again cutting him off. "I don't sleep with every female I come across."

"You know that I don't either."

He grinned. "No, but you sure try hard enough."

Tavo chuckled. "Whatever. Oh, it's been too long, brother. Are you still with the 349th?"

"No, I recently joined the Rangers. This swelling is the result of my first mission with them."

"Are you still a Minor?"

Garek shook his head. "Major. I lead a squad of three others."

"Could I meet them?"

"Of course. They should still be in the mess hall."

"What cycle is it?"

"The third."

Tavo smiled, though he still looked troubled. "Good, I could use a drink. And, I see you've already had some yourself."

"Just a glass...of Q'osa."

"Your day went that badly?"

"It was more to numb the pain than anything else. We, uh, crashed our vehicle on the way out and that's how I got beat up."

"Hmm, I suppose that's where my bruises came from as well." They stopped to look at a viewscreen, which displayed New Alexdria being glassed. "Why are we doing this to them, Garek? What's the real reason?"

Garek sighed as they moved on. "I don't know, Tavo. And I don't really want to know." They entered the mess hall, and sure enough, Garek's friends were still seated at the same table. He shook his head upon seeing that Orna had his head on the table, an empty glass of Q'osa in his hand. "I thought he didn't drink."

Ar'n shrugged as they sat. "He eventually asked for a glass, then another, and then another." He shook his head. "After the fifth glass, he began...er, flirting with a Minor at the table across from us. Well, that's the result."

"He got knocked out?"

Ar'n chuckled. "By the back of the Minor's hand, yes. You must be Tavo. Would you like a drink?"

"Hell yeah, after how my day went."

"Understandable. I suppose they will take you back to your ship soon?"

"I would like to see them try. I was assigned to the Ardent Prayer," he finished to Ar'n's raised brow.

"Oh."

"He will be going home," someone suddenly said.

Tavo turned, seeing Eaite standing behind him. "Home?"

"While your brother's actions preserved your honor, the Supreme Commander decided it would be best if you were sent back. He found your capture unacceptable, and thinks that it would be risky to keep you around."

Tavo's shoulders slumped. "I see. When am I being sent back, sir?"

"You will be sent to the Holy City, where you will stay until the proper arrangements are made. You will leave during the Second Cycle tomorrow."

"Understood." Once the General was gone, he looked to Garek and spoke in their families dialect. "If they think that's a punishment, they are mistaken."

"Tavo, you know how father can be..."

"Yes, but it's home. His foolishness will be a small price to pay for freedom from this hell. It was good to see you again, Garek. May Zuda guide you down the path ahead." He stood after downing the last of his drink. "Farewell for now, little brother."

"Until next time." Garek sighed sadly as his brother left the mess hall. He wanted very much to catch up with Tavo. _"Ten years is a long time," _he thought, looking toward the ceiling. _"It would seem that _someone _doesn't like seeing me happy." _

"Garek?" He shook his head; it was Ar'n speaking to him. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine," he said lowly, staring into his drink.

"Are you going to drink that?" Garek simply pushed the glass across the table to an already intoxicated Ar'n. The latter clumsily nudged the unconscious form of Orna, who groaned as he put a hand to his face.

"What did I tell you?" he growled. "No matter what-

"Don't give you anything to drink," Ar'n finished, slurring. "Listen, Orna...when you ask an intoxicated person for some liquor, what do you think their response will be?" Before Orna could answer, "It's 'Oh, good! Now I have a drinking buddy!' That said, we're both to blame here."

"Whatever," Orna said, still rubbing his face. "Z'aes, what happened this time?"

"What do you mean 'this time'?" Ar'n said, lazily leaning toward Orna, the latter shoving him away.

"Orna and I have been friends for quite some time, Ar'n. Orna, you...hmm."

"I...what?"

"This is embarrassing," Z'aes said, rubbing the back of his neck before motioning Orna to lean forward and whispering what had happened.

"Oh, Gods," Orna groaned indignantly. "I'm going to be a laughingstock."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"What are you going to do?" a Major inquired from the table across from them; the same table that had held the Minor from before. "Allow someone to pin you to the floor before a higher-up steps in?"

Z'aes growled. "Try me, asshole."

The Major scoffed. "Please, Minor. It looks like that scrawny bastard next to you would be more of a challenge. Oh, and what do you know? He's a Major, as well."

"Let it be, Z'aes," Garek said haltingly. "He's just trying to get a rise out of you."

"And, I've already succeeded. So, what will it be, brothers? The pathetic excuse for a Major, or the one who defends his ho-"

"What did you just call me?" Garek said, standing.

The Major downed the rest of his drink before saying, "I believe I called you pathetic...yes, that's the word I used. Nice bruise, by the way. Did someone already beat the hell out of you for doing something stupid?"

"Would you like me to show you just how I got this?" Garek growled, the mess hall suddenly becoming quiet.

The Major smirked and leaned back in his chair. "Sure, why not? I like a good story." Garek moved behind the Major and rudely knocked his helmet off. "Hey..."

"First off, I didn't have my helmet on. Secondly," he paused to grab hold on the Major's head. "It was in combat."

The Major struggled, but Garek's grip was surprisingly strong. "L-let go."

"The four of us were finished with our mission, but the humans had a tank. A shell impacted the ground in front of our vehicle, causing it flip and myself.." He slammed the Major's head into the table top. "Hit the pavement face-first." Hearing the Major suppress a sob, "Tell me, who is really the pathetic one here?" He turned, looking around the mess hall and seeing several shocked faces. "Anyone else have a comment to make? No? Good," he finished, retaking his seat without another word.

"Damn, Garek. I'll make a mental note to never piss you off," Ar'n said, the display having clearly sobered him a bit.

Garek snorted, remembering that line. "It wouldn't be a terrible idea," he grunted. "Well, my friends, I'm tired. Have a good night."

As Garek entered his barracks, Nazo stepped from his office. "Could I have a word? It's important, 'Izakee."

"Of course." Garek stepped through the doorway and stopped, seeing two familiar faces.

"Major, I'm sure you've met with General 'Atuggee."

"I have..."

"Excellent, because I have a new assignment for you. Care to explain, General?"

Eaite sighed. "The Supreme Commander changed his mind, 'Izakee. He wants us to go on one final mission before sending the both of us home...and, since we are the last known survivors of the _Ardent Prayer_, we have been given a choice..." Eaite looked to Tavo, who nodded.

"We have the choice of going in alone...or bringing a small contingent of troops, of our choosing, along with us."

Garek's mandibles twitched in thought for a moment before he turned to Nazo. "When and where?"

"In eight days' time, at a place the humans call 'Sword Base'."

"Do you mean the installation that our forces took?"

"_Attempted _to take, Major," Nazo corrected bitterly. "The 812th Infantry Division was never known for failing an assault...until now."

Garek nodded, knowing of that division's record. "How did they fail?"

Nazo scowled. "A team of super soldiers. _Augmented humans_," he spat, typing a few commands into his console and bringing up a diagram of one of the armored soldiers. "The humans call them 'Spartans', a name that apparently means something to them."

"_So that's what the human in my vision was," _Garek thought, staring at the diagram. "Do you know if we will run into any of these soldiers?"

"There have been recorded sightings of them all over the planet, but the area around this installation has been void of these vermin...or so our scouting parties tell us."

Garek's eyes remained on the diagram. "Hmm. I'll inform the others in the morning."

"I suggest you try to teach them some of your hand-to-hand forms, 'Izakee. These 'Spartans' seem to enjoy getting...up close and personal," Nazo said, handing him a datacrystal.

Garek nodded before exiting the office and removing his armor pieces beside his bunk. _"So, a new foe...and, possibly, future ally," _he thought as he lie down, sleep quickly taking over his mind.

6. Chapter V: A sword, Broken

Chapter V: A Sword, Broken...

**Location: Phantom en route to Sword Base, Babd Cathca Ice Shelf, Eposz**

**Date: August 29, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Local Time: 26: 37 hours**

Garek watched from his position on a cliff overlooking two Tyrant-class anti-aircraft batteries as a mix of troops from the 812th ID and 78th Airborne made defensive preparations below. "Ar'n, what's the situation in the courtyard look like?" he said into comms, going prone and readying his Type-50 SRS.

"The courtyard has been completely cleared of human forces. No sign of those super soldiers you told us about..."

"Copy that, regroup with Orna and Z'aes on the western perimeter, I'll make my way over there shortly."

_"Understood. Why are you over th-" _Ar'n's sentence was cut short as an explosion rocked the first AA battery.

Tavo's head snapped up at the sound of the explosion. "What the hell was that?"

A nearby Ultra- Zant 'Majasee, Tavo believed his name was- hollered to his group of Kig-Yar for a status report. "Enemy armor on fast approach! Everyone take up defensive positions!"

Tavo cursed as he took cover behind a shipping container and prepped the core on his Type-25 DER. He instinctively shielded his eyes as the first Tyrant gun lit up the evening sky with a bright blue-purple explosion. He peeked around and growled as three soldiers, soldiers he knew to be an elite fighting force the humans called "ODSTs", came over the hill and began spraying 'Majasee's Kig-Yar with automatic weapons fire. He grunted as the second tower was hit by a shell, the blast knocking the breath from his lungs and making his ears ring.

He moved across the road as shells continued hammering into the gun, nodding to the two Minors on the opposite side. Before they could nod back, the other tower shared the same fate as the first and went up in a brilliant fireball. He shouted at the two to move, but they were crushed by a piece of debris before they could respond. "Damn it!"

'Majasee's voice was audible over the carnage. "Fall back! Fall back towards the gate!" Tavo froze behind his cover before the Ultra came around and grabbed him by an arm. "Did you not hear me, Major? _Move your ass!_" Tavo shook his arm free and turned to fire on the tank, 'Majasee doing the same with a Type-51 Carbine behind him. "Where's

'Kozoree with that damn Launcher?"

"Dead, sir!" Tavo shouted over his shoulder.

"Distract that tank, 'Rezakee. I'm going to go for the-" The Ultra was cut short as a shell impacted directly behind him, knocking Tavo onto his belly. He howled as he attempted to roll onto his back, feeling a piece of shrapnel burning into his skin. He hissed as his hand touched the chunk of metal, but he bore the pain and removed it before rolling over. He looked at the puddle he was lying in, the majority of the water being replaced by the Ultra's gore. Still dazed, he pushed himself onto his hands and attempted to stand, only to fall over. He slowly looked to his legs, only to find one a mangled mess and the other bent wrongly in several places with the bone just below his knee sticking through his skin. He groaned and lay back, the realization that he was paralyzed bringing him out of the daze. He closed his eyes as the tank's tracks began to grind the ground in front of the puddle. He activated his comm link and spoke calmly, barely able to hear himself over the approaching vehicle.

Garek froze in shock as he watched the display. He barely heard the _beep _emit from the right speaker in his helmet and the words that followed. _"Garek...my brother...see you on other side." _He closed his eyes as the treads began to roll over his brother's useless legs, only to snap them back open as he heard his screams.

"No," he said softly, his mandibles quivering. He threw his head back and roared at the top of his lungs, "No!" He sank to the ground as the cry echoed through the valley, tears already sliding down his face. "Fuck," he sobbed. He repeated himself many times, banging the back of his helmeted head against the cliff face. He quickly shook his head, growling. _"Get it together, Garek. You are no longer a child." _

_"That doesn't make it any easier," _another part of his mind argued. He smacked the side of his helmet with a palm, quieting the voices. With a sad sigh, he stood and began walking for the perimeter that his team was holding without incident.

*Location: Covenant-held western perimeter, Sword Base exterior. Approximately 250 meters from the wall.*

*Local Time: 27:02 Hours*

Ar'n turned from his spot at a fire, seeing Garek approach. His brows furrowed as he watched his friend's motions; he had his head hung and he didn't bother to lift his hooves to take a step. He stood and walked over, stopping the taller Sangheili before he reached the fire. He looked over his shoulder before removing his helmet and whispering, "Garek...what's wrong?"

Garek silently pushed him aside and sat before the fire, staring into the flames. Ar'n huffed and sat beside him, tilting his head as the sound of Garek's voice became audible. Though he didn't understand what Garek was saying, he knew that his friend was praying. He frowned as the tone of the prayer became bitter. Deciding to be respectful, he waited for Garek to finish before saying, "My question still stands."

"Nothing," came the quiet reply, the sorrow evident.

"Bullshit," Ar'n said, looking to the two Minors he had been previously chatting with. "Would you excuse us, brothers? Please?"

"But, I wanted to hear more about Ju-"

"_Go_," Ar'n spat, cutting his fellow Minor off, the latter nodding and motioning the other to follow. "Tell me what's wrong," he demanded.

"...Just leave me be."

"Not until-"

"Don't make it an _order_," Garek growled quietly. "Go tell those two more about where you're from." Garek waited for his friend to leave before removing his own helmet and wiping the crust that had formed under his eyes. He stared blankly into the flames, seeing the previous event play repeatedly in them. He closed his eyes and rubbed them, only to see the images play behind his lids. "What?" he snapped, answering his commlink after it beeped in his earpiece.

"_Calm that tone, Major," _Nazo's voice demanded.

Garek sighed. "Sorry, sir," he said, his tone still bitter.

"_Take your team into the base, 'Izakee. Contact with the Spec Ops team assigned to General 'Atuggee has been lost." _There was a brief pause before he continued, "_It's vital that you do so _now_. Several Huragok have picked up signals being sent back and forth between two constructs, one human and the other is...unknown?"_

"Unknown?" Garek repeated. He had already figured out that a superior was feeding Nazo the information.

"_Apparently so...I believe this is what we came looking for, Major."_

Garek forced the looping images to the back of his mind as he stood. "Understood, moving now." He heard a faint whisper on the other end before Nazo spoke again.

"_There is something bothering you, 'Izakee. Mind if I-"_

"Not over comms."

"_I understand. Report to me once you get back to the ship."_

"Yes sir," Garek said before closing the link and walking over to Ar'n. "We have a new task, Minor."

Ar'n nodded, replaced his helmet, and quickly caught up to Garek, who had already started walking away. "What are we doing?"

"Going inside. Where are Orna and Z'aes?"

Ar'n halted and turned around. "Orna, Z'aes, let's go," he yelled.

"Garek, listen. I'm merely concerned..."

"It's none of your damn business, Ar'n," he sighed, hearing two other Sangheili approach. "Let's focus on the task at hand."

"Right," Ar'n said lowly, obviously disappointed.

"What's going on?" Orna said.

"Ar'n, remember that data you found on the _Seeker_"

"What about it?"

Garek looked between the three of them slowly. "The construct," he said simply, turning and walking for the base's walls. Getting inside was very simple since there was nothing to resist their advance, but that didn't make the journey an enjoyable one. The courtyard was now littered with spent shell casings, plasma burns on the pavement and various walls, and, most disturbingly, the bodies and blood of Covenant soldiers. Garek quickly looked away from a few of the Sangheili corpses upon seeing a few sliced throats, bloody stab marks atop combat helmets, or heads that were turned in _completely _wrong directions.

"No ordinary infantry did this," Z'aes said as they entered the building's Atrium.

"You're absolutely right, 'Xaseree. That would be the work of Spartans, human super soldiers. General 'Atuggee's body should be in that chamber, document it and proceed to the waypoint."

"There's a problem with that, sir," Ar'n said from his place ahead of the group. Garek saw him pick up a helmet, gesturing to them with it. "I have his helmet in my hands, but there's no body. No blood, explosive residue, nothing to say he was here except for his weapon and this piece of armor."

"What are you saying, 'Drakosee?"

"That he either didn't die here, ran, or...was captured."

"If he were captured, we would be able to track his movements...Wait a moment, we just picked up another signal sent by those constructs. In the room, down that hall and to the left."

Garek brought up his Type-50 and pointed to the correct door, silently telling them to be ready to breach the room. He heard a loud metallic _click_ from within and humans speaking in incredulous tones. Ar'n quickly pressed a button and the sliding doors whooshed open, and they ran in only to the final human's armored back enter a hole in the wall, which had already been sliding closed. Garek growled as he banged on the false section. "Damn it," he snarled. "Sir, the humans got away..."

"I see. Do you know where they went?"

"Underground," Ar'n said slowly. "Sir, the glacier!"

"What about it, 'Drakosee? It's just ice..."

"Just hear me out on this. I suggest you send what remains of our forces to investigate. Track the source of the signal and feed them the intel, _immediately_."

"Your suggestion is greatly appreciated, 'Drakosee. The squads remaining on the surface are already loading onto Phantoms. Get back outside, there will be one waiting in the courtyard."

They remained silent on the walk out, staying so as they entered the waiting Phantom. "Pilot, do you know where we're going?"

The pilot, a Major, didn't even look from his display as he curtly answered, "Back to the _Seeker of Truth_."

Ar'n stepped into the cockpit. "What? Why?"

"I have your commander's orders right here if you would like to have a look."

"Just take us back," Garek said before heading back into the troop bay and sitting heavily in a seat with a sigh.

"What's the matter with him?" he heard Z'aes ask quietly.

"No idea," Ar'n replied. "He refuses to say."

Garek looked over at them while keeping his helmeted head pointed downward, making it seem like he was staring at the floor. He watched as Orna removed his helmet and turned with a smile. "Let me try."

Z'aes grabbed him by the arm, obviously recognizing the tone. "Orna, don't be stupid. I doubt he's--"

"Just watch," Orna said, cutting him off and shaking his arm free. Garek didn't react as Orna sat beside him, a little _too _close. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Garek said, his voice even.

"Nonsense," Orna said softly, placing a hand on Garek's shoulder. "Listen handsome, everything--"

"Take your hand _off of me_," Garek growled, feeling the hand instantly leave his body. "Orna, if being," he paused for a moment before shrugging, "_that way _makes you happy, well, then more power to you. I, however, am not. Everyone, I appreciate your concern, but I just want to be left alone right now."

"I'm...sorry if I offended you," Orna said quietly as he stood.

Garek sighed. "It's fine, just...go back over there, please."

"Orna, how many times have you tried that and it never work?" he heard Z'aes sigh as Orna retook his original seat.

"It was worth a shot, damn it," came the clipped response.

"Indeed it was," Ar'n said sarcastically. "You did a _lot _of good. I

mean, if making yourself look like an ass was your intention, then you succeeded. Congratulations."

Garek removed his helmet, cleared his throat to get their attention, and gave them a glare that clearly said 'All of you should shut up'. Once they fell silent, "Thank you."

Location: Seeker of Truth, 78th Airbone barracks, Officer's Quarters****

Ship Clock: 15:18 Hours****

Garek silently stepped into Nazo's office, the Ultra waiting patiently behind his desk. They shared simple nods before the latter gestured to a chair. As Garek sat, "So, what's the matter? You look...depressed."

Garek remained silent for several minutes before speaking softly. "I just...let it happen."

"Let what happen?"

"I let him die."

Nazo's confused frown grew. "Let who die? All of your squadmates returned..."

"Not them," Garek sighed. "My brother...Tavo."

"Soldiers die in battle, 'Izakee. It happens," he finished with a shrug.

"He was not just a soldier," Garek growled. "Have you ever had to watch a family member die?"

"Well...no," Nazo said quietly. "No, I have not."

Garek leaned forward, his face now emotionless. "It is far from easy..."

"Indeed. Listen, if there is anything you need...just come to me and ask."

Garek sighed. "All I ask is that I be left alone for a while. That's all I want."

"How long would you consider 'a while'?"

"Hmm. About...seventy-two hours?"

Nazo nodded. "I will let everyone know to not disturb while you...collect yourself."

Garek stood with a sigh and paused in the doorway. "You could have just said 'grieve'..."

"But I didn't. Oh, before you go..."

"Sir?"

"Anyone who completes their first campaign is considered a veteran. Do you see the door at the other end of the barracks?" Garek simply nodded. "Those are the private quarters...where the veterans stay. Now, if you would like to keep your current bunk, I can have everyone leave..."

Garek smiled sadly. "I think I'll take the quarters. Thank you, sir."

"I will inform your squadmates about their rooms later." Nazo paused to key a command into his terminal before looking back to Garek. "The door will now open for you."

"Again, thank you."

Nazo shook his head. "No need. You have earned it, in my opinion."

Garek simply nodded before proceeding to the rear of the barracks and walking through the open door. He looked to each door as he passed, quickly reaching the one marked with his name. He keyed in the first four digits of his ID number, as he had to do with any other security measure. The door slid open to reveal his quarters. "Large enough," he thought, eyeing what the room contained; a bed large enough for two, a desk with a private terminal on its surface, a full armor and weapons locker, and another door which led to his own private washroom. Being in the mood he was, he decided to sit at the desk and stare at its surface. He closed his eyes and allowed the silent tears to flow, grieving in the way he was taught to be the most respectful by his mother.

"Brother, you need not cry for me."

Garek's eyes snapped open at the voice. "What? Who's there?"

The voice chuckled lightly. "I've not even been dead for twenty-four hours, and you've already forgotten what I sound like."

Garek, sensing the direction the voice was coming from, looked to the mirror visible through the washroom's still-open door and gasped. "Tavo?"

"Aye."

"B-but...but, you're dead."

"I _do _recall mentionong that..."

Garek was shocked. "H-how?"

"I am speaking to you from the Far Side, little brother. You need not blame yourself for what happened to me."

"But it _was _my fault!"

"No, it was n-"

"Yes it was!" Garek cried, shattering the mirror with his fist.

Tavo's voice sighed in disappointment. "The Gods only gave me this one chance, Garek. If you will not be reasonable-

"_Reasonable_? You expect me to be-" He sighed heavily. "Listen to me, arguing with a damn ghost."

"If you don't want to believe it, I understand," Tavo's voice said sadly. "I'll be waiting for you, brother."

Garek awoke with a gasp, finding himself in the bed within his quarters. "Was it just a dream?" he thought aloud, suddenly hissing as he removed the blanket. He looked to his right hand, only to see proof that it wasn't a dream; dried blood and small shards of glass. He walked into the washroom, plucked the shards from his hand, and splashed some of the hot water on his face. He walked back into the main room, hearing his terminal chime. "A message from mother?" he said, looking at the screen. He sighed upon opening it and reading the text. "Is this your form of mocking me?" he said.

"_Garek, my son, it has been quite some time since we last spoke. I was wondering how things have been for you these past couple of years._

_ -Kir'a 'Defum_

"_P.S. Have you made any contact with your brother, Tavo? I know the likelihood is low, I am merely curious."_

He brought up the holographic keyboard and slowly began to type.

"_Mother, it has indeed been a while..._

"_I'll have you know that I'm doing quite well. My marksman ship has greatly improved over the past months, and I recently volunteered for the Rangers. I'm a Major Domo now, leading a squad of three others into combat...I was also given the rights of a veteran, having survived my first campaign against the Humans._

"_As for Tavo...no, mother, I haven't heard from him in over a decade. Unfortunately, I don't know if I ever will..._

_ -Garek 'Izakee"_

He hesitantly keyed the send button, knowing that he had just told a lie. "She'll get a complete report eventually," he said to himself. His intercom suddenly chimed, Nazo's voice coming through the speaker.

"_Someone wishes to see you, 'Izakee."_

"Who is it?"

"_The Minor you were sparring with when we first met...'Tsomee."_

He thought for a moment, thinking of all the times he had gotten Rotje out of trouble or comforted him when he was feeling down.

"_We've been friends since early childhood...hell, we might as well be brothers." _He sighed before unlocking his door. "Let him in."

Rotje entered a few moments later, more than a few bullet pocks and scratches on his cobalt armor. He set a sealed bowl in front of Garek before leaning against the wall beside the desk.

"I just heard about what happened," he trailed off as Garek curiously lifted the lid and smelled stewed Kaz'o before resealing it and pushing it away. "You're not going to eat that? I thought it was your favorite..."

"Not hungry," came the simple response. "And?"

"I'm sorry for your loss, brother. I remember the last time you two saw each other, I had just left your home that day."

"I remember..."

Rotje remained quiet for several moments, moving his mandibles to ask a question and stopping just as the words began to form. Finally, he said, "What is it like?"

Garek looked up at him, dark spots under his eyes; what sleep he _had _gotten wasn't good. "You don't want to know," he said quietly. "It's like...it's like having to watch yourself, and then you realize that it wasn't actually you...In short, it's..." He sighed. "It's tough."

"I'm sure. If there's anything I can do to help you through this..."

"Thank you, Rotje...but, I think you should go. I can handle this myself," he said, his tone guarded.

"I understand, brother," Rotje said, giving a pat on the shoulder. "If you're up for it, see you in the mess hall later?"

"I'll think about it..."

Rotje smiled. "Good enough for me. See you around."

"I appreciate your concern," he said just before Rotje exited, the latter giving a nod. Once he was alone again, he keyed his intercom and selected Nazo's office. "Sir, do I have any assignments to do around the ship?"

_"Hmm...you haven't been requested for anything, 'Izakee. I _am _a man of my word, after all."_

"Thank you, sir. I was just checking." Garek sighed and leaned back in his chair, lazily propping his hooves atop the desk. He checked the time as he rubbed his head tiredly, seeing that it read 10:34 hours. He didn't even remember closing his eyes as the lack of sleep from the night before caught up with him.

7. Chapter VI: Halo

**Chapter VI: Halo**

**Location: Command Deck of the Seeker of Truth, in orbit of the ring world.**

**Ship Clock: 06:24 hours**

Date: September 19, 2552 (UNSC Calendar); approximately 9 hours prior to the UNSC Pillar of Autumn's arrival.****

"Is that what I think it is, your Excellency?" Nazo said, staring in awe at the viewscreen before him; he had a small speech impediment due to his lower-right mandible being completely gone.

"Indeed it is, 'Bezatee. What I am about to ask of you may be a shockâ€|or it may not, but it is this. How quickly could you have your entire platoon ready for deployment?" Thel 'Vadamee said.

Nazo raised a brow in slight surprise. "Five minutes."

"Excellent, I suggest you order them to prepare for departure." Thel leaned in and spoke quietly, so only the two of them could hear. "How is Major 'Izakee faring since his last assignment?"

"I, unfortunately, cannot say, your Excellency. I gave him the appropriate time and space to grieve, but heâ€|is much quieter than he was before. You would have to ask his squadmates," he finished with a shrug.

"Why have you not? I do believe that is a small responsibility as their commander, 'Bezatee." Thel turned back to the viewscreen, studying the ring's intricate and glorious surface. "Now go. We have been waiting for this day, and I will wait no longer."

"Of course, your Excellency."

Garek barely registered that his door chimed as he typed away at his terminal. He had been busy for the past week and half, doing research on the humans' movements on different worlds or studying what very little information the Covenant had on Spartans. A small part of him was surprised that he was able to do such research on what little sleep he had gotten since Reach; when he tried, he would just toss and turn for hours until the Third Cycle became the First cycle again and when he _did_ sleep, it was filled with visions or nightmares. All-in-all, he was in rough shape. He sighed when the chime rang again, keying the intercom. "Yes?" he said, his voice hoarse.

"_It's Deza._"

"I'm busy at the moment, Deza. Could this wait?"

"_I'm afraid notâ€|_"

He sighed again and unlocked the door, rubbing his face tiredly as he said, "Enter."

"I'm sorry if I'm intruding, butâ€|" She paused when she actually looked at Garek. His skin had turned an unhealthy looking shade of gray, almost silver, his eyes had dulled and sunken into his head a little with black bags underneath; he almost looked dead. "Garek, you look terrible."

"Whatever," he grunted, returning attention to his terminal. "What do you want?"

"To check on you; you used to come see me at least twice a week to report yourâ€|sleeping patterns. I haven't seen you since," she

trailed off.

"Go ahead, say it."

"Since your brother died."

He shrugged. "I have been busy."

"That's not what others are sayingâ€|"

"I do not care what others think, they do _not_ know what it is like."

"Are you listening to yourself talk, have you looked in a mirror recently?"

"Can't. It's broken."

Deza sighed. "Garek, listen. I'm concerned, your squadmates are concerned. Hell, even some of the Rangers that don't like you are concerned."

"I don't-"

"Yes, you do," she interrupted, turning the chair away from his desk. "Now, I am going ask you some questions, and you _are_ going to answer them."

Garek huffed and crossed his arms, "Fine."

She pulled up another chair and sat across from him. "How have you been sleeping?"

"Come on, Deza. Look at me."

"Have you slept at all in these three weeks?"

He thought for several moments before shrugging. "I cannot say."

"What little sleep you _have_ gotten, did you have any visions?"

"Every time I close my eyesâ€|"

She nodded, continuing to take notes. "What about the sleep aid?" He simply pointed to the wall behind her, where the green liquid had stained the wall and floor, the vial shattered in a puddle by the door. "Garekâ€|"

"It didn't help," he growled.

"That's what I'm here for, Garek."

"What could you have done? Do you have somethingâ€|more potentâ€|something that would put me under?"

She took note of the almost pleading look in his eyes as he asked the last question. "Noâ€|not at this moment."

He looked back to his terminal. "I should really get back to what I was doingâ€¦"

"_Why are you doing this to yourself?"_ she thought, her eyes widening at the realization that she had voiced the question. He was glaring at her now, his mandibles closed tight and his eyes slits.

"Get out."

She shook her head, having a thought. "No."

"_Out!_"

"Answer the question first," she said, returning the glare he gave. He slowly stood and moved to grab her arm, but froze as she backhanded him. "Sit down."

He complied and sat, his head hung shamefully. Several minutes passed before he spoke. "Becauseâ€¦I am â€¦coward, and I don't deserve my station," he said lowly. "Iâ€¦I could have saved himâ€¦stopped that tank fromâ€¦" He didn't finish, shaking his head. "I could have done it," he muttered repeatedly.

"Garekâ€¦Garek!" He stopped and looked at her. "There is nothing you could have done. Tavo was resigned to his fateâ€¦he wanted you to have this." She reached into a pocket and took out a small stone. He snatched it from her grasp and looked at its smooth, blue-green surface, turning it over several times in his hands. "What is it?"

"A sapphire," he said. "My oldest brother, Soha 'Arozakee, sent it home to mother before his death on one of the human-controlled worlds. Believe it or not," he paused to chuckle, "it brought my family great luck in the years to follow; we never had a single bad crop. When it came time for Tavo to leave for service, she gave it to him without father's knowledge. We still had good harvests, but they began to declineâ€¦" He closed a hand around it before placing it on the desk. "Thank you," he said, suddenly embracing her.

She sat still in surprise before slowly returning the gesture. "You're welcome."

"Ahem," a new voice said in the doorway, the two instantly separating. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No, your Excellency," Deza said, a barely noticeable blush on her face.

Nazo smirked and waved her over. "How is he?" he whispered.

She glanced at Garek, who had his head turned away in an attempt to hide his own blush. "He's seen better days."

"Humph, indeed. Thank you for checking on him, 'Telam. I will forget what I saw."

"Thank youâ€¦and, don't get the wrong idea. He doesn't have eyes for me," she whispered.

"Noted. Did you tell him?"

"No."

Nazo nodded. "Now, if you would excuse us?"

"Of course. Stay on the path..."

"For it is reaching its end," he finished. "So, Major. I have heard some things about youâ€|"

"I'm sure. I'm fine," he said, anticipating the question.

"You do not look it."

Garek sighed. "I know. Are you here about the ring, sir?"

"I am. Get washed up, geared up, and get to the loading bay."

"Now?"

"For your sake, I'll try to persuade the Supreme Commander to delay our landing for another few hours. He is concerned about you, as well." He walked over to the terminal and shut it down. "Now get some damn sleep, Garek. You look like a living corpse."

Garek paused at the use of his given name. "Yes sir."

**Location: Starboard Loading Bay #26**

**Ship Clock: 12:37 Hours; approximately 3 hours prior to the UNSC Pillar of Autumn's arrival. **

"You are looking much better than you did a few hours before, 'Izakee," Nazo said as they waited for the Supreme Commander to arrive.

Garek chuckled. He still had bags under his eyes, but his skin tone had already returned to its normal state and his eyes no longer looked dull. "Thank you, sir. I suppose that nap did wonders for me, because I certainly _feel _better."

"Excellent," Thel suddenly said. "I don't want any of the troops under my command to be feeling down when the Journey is so near."

"Indeed," Nazo said. "What would you have us do, your Excellency?"

"Right," Thel said, as if forgetting why he had gathered the entire 78th Ranger Division. As they all got into formation, going by squad then rank, he moved to the front and spoke. "My brothers, below us is the answer that we have sought for generations! The holy Prophets have spoken of this day for quite some time, and it has finally arrived! The Gods have smiled upon us by leading the humans hereâ€|so that they may witness, firsthand, their limitless power! In the days to come, they will watch as we walk the path into the Divine Beyond while they are cast down by the Holy Wind!"

Garek secretly rolled his eyes as the rest of the troops collectively roared in approval. "He may be a great public speaker and leader, but that is bullshit," he thought.

"Now, mount up! The time is at hand, and you will ensure that we walk through the gates of Paradise!"

Garek wasted no time getting onto the Phantom that he would share with squads one and three. He stepped into the cockpit to see a familiar face. "Rypa, you survived!"

The newly-appointed Major grinned. "Aye, and I see you did as well!" He looked to his new co-pilot, a Minor, before continuing in the same dialect they had used the first time they met. "I heard about what happened. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Garek said warmly. "I will join him soon, eh?"

Rypa nodded, "As will the rest of us, brother. If we don't speak before it beginsâ€¦|see you on the other side."

Garek nodded once before walking back into the troop bay and joining his squad at the back of the Phantom; they would be the last group to exit the dropship. "Well, there he is! Mr. Skeptical!" Ar'n said lightly as Garek sat next to him.

"I can smell the alcohol on your breath. You best put your helmet on before Nazo catches it, too," Garek said seriously, ignoring his friends jibe.

"Why do you have to be a buzz kill?" Ar'n muttered as he complied with the order. "I was only joking."

Garek smiled. "I know," he said, softly punching him on the left shoulder pad. "In all seriousness, Nazo would go crazy if he smelled your breath."

"I know." Ar'n looked around briefly before leaning in and whispering, "Garek, what you told us about the ringsâ€¦|is it true?"

"I honestly don't know, Ar'n. I'm not sure I should believe my visionsâ€¦|I have yet to see one come true."

"Hmm. Only one way to find out, I suppose."

"Indeed." He slipped on his own helmet before standing and approaching Nazo at the front of the troop bay, where he was talking with the leader of 3rd Squad â€" Major Domo Anto 'Defrumee. "Sir, what exactly will we be doing?"

"If you had been here a moment ago, Garek, you would have found out," Anto said rudely.

"Kiss my scrawny ass, Anto." He and Anto had never gotten along. Anto thought just like the majority of the soldiers from his group in the 349th had, and it didn't help that Garek had beaten him in every spar they were ever paired in.

"Quiet, both of you," Nazo said haltingly. "Major 'Izakee was doing

the right thing in making sure that his squad was prepared for the landing. It may be a gift from the Gods, but we do not know what is lurking down there." Anto stifled a growl as they shared a nod. "Our squads will be forming a triangular perimeter in this region." He highlighted a valley on the holographic screen of his datapad, expanding the area. "This perimeter will be scanning for any type of hostile activity before securing the region for the Council. 'Izakee, your squad will start here and search in a two hundred-fifty meter radius while the other two squads do the same here, and here." He highlighted these areas with different colors as he spoke.

Garek frowned, noting something. "Z'aes," he said, nodding him over when the Minor looked his way.

"Sir?"

"What is it, 'Izakee?" Nazo said curiously.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing, Z'aes?"

"Yes." He pointed to a small area where the three circles didn't meet. "Is there a reason for this hole in the perimeter, sir?"

"Ah, that. Yes, 'Xaseree, there is. This," he said, highlighting the twenty-five meter hole, "is one of the entrances to what the Prophets called the Library. We were kept in the dark about what is inside, as we are simple ground troops." Nazo scoffed before muttering, "My ass."

Garek and Z'aes chuckled while Anto's face hardened. "With all due respect, sir, you shouldn't insult the Prophets in such a way."

"I was simply using their words, _Major _'Defrumee. If the Prophets want to hold that against me, that is their problemâ€| but, as they said: we are simple ground troops. Why would they waste their time on us?" Nazo smirked as anger grew in Anto's eyes. He deactivated the datapad and nodded. "Dismissed. 'Izakee," he said as Garek turned.

"Sir?"

"Smack Ar'n for me; I can smell the Q'osa from here."

Garek nodded. "Oh, about thatâ€|I believe he has a problem, sir. He has been drinking heavily ever since he got his quarters and when I would go by on my nightly walks around the ship, I swear I heard him sobbing through the doorâ€|"

"Hmm," Nazo turned toward Ar'n, "Minor 'Drakosee, get up here!"

Ar'n stood at attention before the two, "Sir!"

"Give me the flask," Nazo demanded, holding his hand out. Once Ar'n had handed over the small canister, he held out his other hand, "And the other one."

"Shit," Ar'n murmured, handing over a smaller canister and watched as Nazo open them both, rearing his head back at the smell.

"What proof is this?"

Ar'n visibly gulped, averting his gaze. "Pureâ€¦"

"Are you trying to poison yourself, boy?"

"No sir."

"I would have your ass for contrabandâ€¦if the Journey weren't so near." Nazo walked over to one of the hatches in the floor, which led to a gravity lift. "So instead, I will do this." He keyed a button on the ceiling, using the hatches manual override and revealing a large body of water below. He looked Ar'n in the face as he dropped both containers through the hatch, closing it afterward. "Now take your helmet off." Ar'n tilted his head before complying, promptly getting backhanded by Garek. "It's time to sober up, 'Drakosee. We have much work to do, and I will not have one intoxicated soldier endangering everyone's lives. Is that clear?"

Ar'n blinked his right eye several times before answering; one of Garek's knuckles had struck the sensitive area between his upper mandible and eye. "Yes sir."

"Return to your seat, both of you. We still have quite a trip."

"He told you to do that, didn't he?" Ar'n said once they were seated again.

"Aye, he did. I may not agree with his methods, but he's right, Ar'n. You really shouldn't drink so much."

"How much I drink is none of your concern."

"Actually, Ar'n, it is. We may be friends, but I am your superior now. If you have a problem, it is my duty to find out and report it so that you can get help with that problem."

"Whatever."

"Do you, at the very least, admit that you made a mistake?"

"Yeah."

Garek nodded. "That's good enough for me," he said, the two falling silent for the rest of the trip. He involuntarily looked up when the familiar cyan light blinked on.

Nazo moved to the front of the troop bay and held his arms out in front of him, palms facing the ceiling. "Stand up!" He patted his chest plate once they were all standing, "Equipment check!" The sound of weapons being charged, shields humming as they rose, and hands patting against armor echoed throughout the Phantom's troop bay, "Squad leaders, report!"

"1st Squad, ready!"

"2nd Squad, ready," Garek called.

"3rd Squad, ready!"

Garek felt the Phantom come to a stop as the doors lowered. "Major 'Defrumee's squad, disembark! Maintain comm silence until I give the all clear!" Nazo got at the rear of 3rd Squad as they got ready to deploy. "The same goes for the rest of you; maintain comm silence." They soon arrived at the second drop-off point, Ar'n hefting their squad's plasma turret as they disembarked.

"Why make me carry this thing?" he muttered. "Why not the heavy weapons specialist?"

"Because," Z'aes began, "you're the second fastest in the squad."

"Yeah, but Garek's faster."

"He is also the squad leader _and_ _sniper, whereas you are a simple rifleman." Z'aes suddenly scoffed. "Someone's a little cranky when they are soberâ€¦"

Ar'n growled. "Fuck you, alright? You have no idea-"

"Task at hand," Garek said haltingly. "Ar'n, hand that here. Cover me." Garek clipped the Beam Rifle to his back before taking the turret and resting it on his shoulder.

"Sorry, sirâ€¦and, thank you."

"No problem. Z'aes, a soldier should be willing to handle any order they are given, whether they like it or not. Position, specialization, or rank does _not_ _matter_."

"I know. What if an order isn't worth following or puts everyone at risk?"

"That would be the obvious exception. An order like that, you have my permission to disobeyâ€¦not that I expect one from Nazo." The Phantom slowed to a halt for the third time and they stepped off into a lush forest. They simply stood there a few minutes, taking in the beautiful scenery. Once he was sure they had had enough time to familiarize themselves with the sights, smells, and sounds, he waved for them to move out with his free hand. "Spread out, far enough for at least one other member of the squad to see you. Ar'n, move ahead and find a place for this turret. Remember, we need _at least_ a one hundred twenty degree field of view." Ar'n nodded took off, going far enough where Garek could just see a few portions of his off-white armor. Garek moved the turret over to his left shoulder and took the Type25-DER from his thigh, aiming forward in a slow sweeping motion. Orna and Z'aes moved away from him until they formed a diamond formation, each of them being twenty-five meters apart. He holstered the weapon upon seeing that Ar'n had stopped, waving for the other two to find spots to cover him from. "What do you have for me?"

Ar'n pointed, "Over there. Do you see how the boulders are shaped?"

Garek walked over to the formation and stuck his head through the opening; it almost looked like the rocks had served as a bunker at some point, likely several millennia ago. "Excellent find, my friend," he said, setting the turret down and climbing through the hole. "Hand me the turret." He took hold as Ar'n fed it through,

unfolding the stand and securing it into the soft earth. Due to the space being so cramped, the gunner would have to crouch when the time came. "One hundred twenty-five degreesâ€¦again, excellent find, Ar'n."

"Ah, don't mention it. What's next, sir?"

Garek made a shrill chirp, calling for Orna and Z'aes to regroup. "Now, we secure the perimeter. Fifteen meter spacing, let's move," he said shortly. They only had only a small area left to secure when Garek suddenly made a low growl, getting everyone's attention. He pointed to an earhole, silently telling them to listen while signaling them to stay completely still with the other hand. It took the three of them a moment to hear what he had, all nodding in confirmation. The voices grew louder; they were humans speaking in a language that wasn't English.

"_Ich denke, dass wir, KapitÃ¤n verloren sind."_

"_Ja sind wir gut verloren. Wir sind irgendeine auslÃ¤ndischeâ€¦Sache, sind wir hier mehrmals vor gewesen, und wir sind verloren. Sie wissen etwas, Harklahn, sind Sie ein wirkliches Genie. Intelligentester Mann habe ich Ã¼berhaupt das VergnÃ¼gen zu kennen gehabt. "_

"_Maloy, verlassen den armen Jungen allein. Ein Wiedereinbau kann er sein, aber der bedeutet nicht, dass Sie erhalten, ihn wie ScheiÃŸe zu behandeln. Zeigen Sie etwas Respekt, er ist im gleichen Boot wie wir."_

"Ar'n, what are they saying?" Garek whispered.

"I don't know. My translator is putting the words on my display, but not actually translating it." Garek continued to listen to their distant banter, frowning when he thought he recognized the third voice. "_Then again," _he thought, "_they all sound the same to me." _Ar'n looked back at him questioningly, his eyes asking what they should do.

"Let them pass. It sounds like they will run right into 1st Squad."

"_Major 'Izakee, how goes your patrol?"_

"Just fine, sir; we have completed our sweep and are making our way towards the entrance of the Library now." Garek heard Nazo begin to say something over comms, but his voice was muted by the deafening roar of engines flying low overhead. He looked up to see a lone human ship, flying fast and _way _too low to the ground. He felt a quake under his hooves as a cloud of dirt and debris rose several miles away from them. "Um, sirâ€¦tell me that I was not the only one to see or hear thatâ€¦"

"_You weren't imagining things, Major. It would seem that our foe has arrived much sooner than anticipatedâ€¦Hurry to the entrance; set 'Drakosee and 'Stronasee at your turret position."_

Garek waved them off before setting off for the waypoint on their HUDs. "Well, this will surely complicate things," he said, slowing as Z'aes struggled to keep pace.

"I don't know, Garek. We have more than half of a fleet, while they have the one ship. A ship, I might add, that is missing the majority of its crew."

"How do you know that?"

"The Supreme Commander came to me, asking for my opinion on what to do."

Garek glanced at him. "Thel, a tactical genius, came to you for advice?"

"I thought it was strange, too. He wanted to just destroy the ship once it left slipspace, but I suggested he send boarding parties insteadâ€|that ended well."

"What happened?"

Z'aes slowed to a jog as he accessed the small computer on the underside of his wrist armor. "Apparently, there was a Spartan on board. It says here that he fought off most of our troops _by himself_, critically wounded a Spec-Ops Officer, andâ€|"

"Andâ€|what?"

"That's it. The report just ends there."

"An unfinished report? That seems highly unlikely," Garek said as they finally approached the tent serving as their field HQ.

"Not unfinished, 'Xaseree, but classified. How are you reading that report?" Nazo said from behind a table; a holoprojector rested in the middle, displaying their area of operation and several yellow-orange dots. He walked around the table, stopping before them with his arms crossed. "I am waitingâ€|"

Z'aes finally shrugged. "It's on the public Battle Net, sir. Have a look," he said, holding out his datapad. "That first section is, anyway."

"Hmm, so it is. Excuse us, 'Xaseree?" Z'aes silently bowed his head with a salute and left the tent. Nazo casually leaned against the table before continuing, "I know that you don't like Major 'Defrume, but not telling him about a human squad heading his way? That may be how he would do things, but not you 'Izakee. Oh, feel free to drop formalities and speak your mind."

"What makes you say I wouldn't?"

"Because you care too much for others' well-beingâ€|so much so that you place it before your own. Is there something I should know about?"

"No."

"Humph. Well, whether you did it on purpose or not is irrelevant; they ran into each other and 1st squad drove them awayâ€|but not before Major 'Defrume lost one of his troops. He sent me a brief

recording of the battleâ€|it was _him_, 'Izakee."

Garek shook his head, confused. "Who?"

"The human who cost me this," Nazo said, indicating the stub where his lower-right mandible used to be. "We may have lost one of our brothers, but we took one of theirs prisoner."

"A prisoner of warâ€|since when do we take prisoners?"

"_We_ don't," Nazo said lowly, "but, apparently 'Defrumee does. Now, don't call me a sympathizer, butâ€|that human doesn't deserve what 'Defrumee is doing to himâ€|he is but a boy."

"He's surely old enough to serve in their military."

"From what he had told 'Defrumee, he is two years younger than the required age. He is very cooperative, for a stubborn human."

"Yet 'Defrumee still tortures him?"

"Aye."

"And you're letting him do that?"

"No. I just sent someone to relieve him of his command of 1st Squad." It was a few minutes before either of them spoke again. "Well, I think you should get some more rest, 'Izakee; you will need as much sleep as you can get."

Garek nodded, thinking. "How much sleep would you recommend?"

"Still tired, are we?"

"I believe I hadâ€|maybe seventy-two hours of rest in three weeks' time, so yes."

"Get as much sleep as you feel you need, 'Izakee. I will send 'Defrumee out to man your turret while 2nd Squad patrols our little camp here," he said, unfolding his arms and looking back to the holographic display. When Garek remained, "Are you still here?"

Garek suddenly snorted and looked around. "Huh?"

Nazo laughed; Garek tilted his head, for it was the first time he had heard the Ultra _actually_ laugh. "Did you fall asleep standing there? Get out of here, your tent is across from this one, in the middle." Garek felt heat on his face, his embarrassment making Nazo laugh harder. "Just get the hell out of here, Major. You're killing me."

Garek chuckled himself as he saluted. "Yes sir, right away." He left the tent and quickly looked around, seeing that it had gone dark in this region. "_Huh, it was like noon back home when we arrived only a few minutes ago,"_ he thought, shrugging as he began walking for 2nd Squad's tent. They weren't tents like the humans used; they were crafted from the same metal used in most Covenant military items, only much more flexible. When not in use or being transported, the material was soft to the touch and could be folded in any way

imaginable. When activated, however, it was like any other Covenant military building; hard to the touch and very durable. He entered, dim lights winking on when they detected his presence.

The interior consisted of the entrance, which held weapons and armor crates or racks. Then, there was a hallway with six doors on either side. The rear of the building held the washroom and lavatories. "We must be sharing with part of another squad," he thought as he keyed the proper access code next to the door marked with his surname.

"No. The other residents would be your commander and I," a voice said. Garek froze, hearing the authoritative, respect-demanding tone that this male spoke in; he sounded much older than Nazo, likely already in his hundreds. Garek slowly turned toward the voice, freezing again when a Councilor stood in the doorway across from his. "What's the matter, boy? Can you not speak now?"

He bowed his head. "My apologies, your Excellency; you surprised me, is all. May I ask you a question?" The Councilor slowly nodded; Garek could tell that he was being scrutinized. "What are you doing here? The Council was not supposed to arrive until--"

"Let me stop you right there, Major. I apologize for interrupting, but I am here to ensure that you are doing your job properly."

"Me?"

"Well, the Rangers. Your unit is new, still considered fresh and therefore, not considered trustworthy of a task such as this. So, the High Council of Masters sent me, Ralo 'Grodasee, to observe and report the 482nd's actions and performance." Ralo said all of this in complete monotone, which clearly said 'Don't mess up, and you won't be put to death by some assassin'. "Waste of my time," he murmured, Garek barely catching it.

"How do you think we are doing so far?"

"I have seen far worse in my day; but, I have also seen much better. Nazo 'Bezatee has proven to be an excellent leader, but he has spread himself too thin across his perimeter and the loss of a soldier showed that. How much do you weigh, Major?"

Garek was caught completely off-guard by the question. "Umm; 398 pounds, I believe."

"Do you not eat, boy? You look like nothing more than skin and bone."

"I eat plenty, your Excellency; perhaps more than most of the larger males." Again, Ralo just nodded. "No offense, but your questions are making me uncomfortable."

"None taken, Major. I must admit, it has been quite some time since I have spoken with anyone who wasn't another politician or my mate, so if I seem intrusive, I apologize. I have one last question before I leave you be; you look quite tired."

"I am, very much so. The past month has been rough," Garek said,

falling silent and waiting for the Councilor to speak.

"What is your opinion on this, just between you and I?"

Garek glanced at the door leading outside. "No disrespect, your Excellency, but I feel that my opinion would get us both executed; me for making such a blunt and 'heretical' statement, and you for keeping it to yourselfâ€|given that someone found out of course."

"Ah, but that is the key to being a politician, boy. You must know how to keep a secret or lie when you need to, all to keep the public safe and happy. Perhaps I could step into your office, as it were?" he said, gesturing to Garek's door. He stepped through his, closing and locking it behind him. "My room has ears in it," he whispered.

"And you were asking me those things while standing in the doorway?" Garek said incredulously.

"Nothing incriminating was said Major. I assure you that you will not awaken with a new hole in your throat."

Garek knew that Ralo was trying to be funny, but something about the way he said that last sentence made him extremely uncomfortable.

"Umâ€|right, come in and I will tell you what I think." He stepped aside and allowed the Councilor to step in first, following shortly after. The room was very basic; one single bed, a personal locker, a desk, and a chair. Garek sat on the bed while Ralo opted to stand. "What did you mean, exactly?"

"How do you feel about the Great Journey? And, be honest. As of now, we are no longer a Councilor and Major Domo, just two people making small talk."

"On a very touchy subject," Garek added, sighing. "Iâ€|don't know what to think. I practice the Old Beliefs, and Iâ€|never believed in the Journey or its Path."

He watched as Ralo frowned; not angrily, like he had expected, but curiously. "Why is that? The Prophets have never failed to be right beforeâ€|"

"Have you forgotten the foundation this Covenant is built on, the war that raged? These relics, these gifts left behind by the Gods are meant to be used and cherished, but not for war and destruction. I believe that They wanted us to expand, but in a much better manner than we are currently using. I mean, we're destroying entire planets simply because a species who doesn't share in our beliefs occupies them. Quite frankly, your Excellency, it's justâ€|asinine."

Ralo blinked, stunned by his words. "You didn't lie about being bluntâ€|" he began. "We are alike, you and I. I, too, practice the ways of the Ancientsâ€|but, we are a warring species; always have been, likely always will be. Before the San 'Shyuum came along, rival clans or keeps would constantly be at war over territory. Do you think the Prophets are liars?" he finished suddenly.

"I don't think, I know. As you said, it is part of being a politicianâ€|only these are corrupt and greedy, lying for their own

personal gain. The High Council of Masters isn't much different."

Ralo sighed. "I will give you that one. The others laugh at me for suggesting we try to make peace before it is too late. The humans may not be the smartest or strongest bunch, but they are much smarter than the Jiralhanae, have more courage than the Unggoy, are nowhere near as greedy as the Kig-Yar, and are about as brilliant as we are. Don't get me started on the Lekgolo, Huragok, or the Yanme'e."

"Do you know what the humans have that none of our races do?" Ralo simply shrugged. "Ingenuity; they have the capability to take the rawest of materials, sometimes next to nothing, and make something useful or great. We call them idiotic vermin, but take a look at the guns their ships are armed with; they can destroy or cripple the best of our ships when they are _fully-shielded_.

They are like a mix of all the species, really; they are strong enough, smart enough, and brave enough to outwit some of our most brilliant tacticians." Garek huffed. "In short, they know more of war than we do because they have been fighting them since they were able to combine rock and wood to make weapons."

"Hmm. You know more than most Zealots, Major."

Garek shrugged, "I like to know my enemies. The humans have a saying that dates back several hundreds of years and it goes like this: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. The author of that quote never commanded a ship or led troops into battle; he was but a man who put words onto paper. Tell me, how are they idiotic when a civilian can come up with wisdom such as that?"

"I suppose they aren't. After all, idiocy and ignorance are two different things."

"Exactlyâ€|no disrespect, but are we done here? As I said before, I am very tired."

Ralo nodded. "I appreciate that you took the time to speak with me. It's good to know that someone else feels the same way I do."

"Likewise, your Excellency. What was saidâ€|?"

"Will not leave this room, on that you have my word." Garek nodded, beginning to remove his armor. "Rest well, Major 'Izakee."

"Thank you, Councilor." Garek slapped a palm to his face when the door closed and locked. "Stupid," he muttered. _"I hope what he told me is true, that he is a man who honors his word."_ He undid his bodysuit and slid it down to his waist, tying the sleeves around himself. Frowning, he laid back; he couldn't place it, but something just didn't feel right and it had nothing to do with his talk with Ralo. _"No, somehowâ€|I feel a disturbance inâ€|the natural order of things. Damn it,"_ he thought, quickly growing frustrated as he tried to think of what this 'disturbance' could be. That did not last, however, as the lack of sleep completely caught up with him.

He had no idea what had just been unleashed by a certain, newly-demoted, Minor Domo within the libraryâ€|

8. Chapter VII: Remember

**Chapter VII: Remember**

**Location: Somewhere in Covenant controlled space**

**Date: October 16, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Local Time: Unknown**

He thought he could hear voices, but the world around him was dark and sound was greatly muffled other than his own breathing. He did know something, and that was that he was very hungry and his chest felt like someone had taken twenty energy swords to it. He audibly groaned as he cracked his eyes open, the sounds around him beginning to focus as he shut them again.

"By the Gods, I think he's waking up!"

"Keep that rifle on him, damn it!"

"No! He is not infected! I made sure of that myself."

That third voice—it sounded familiar to him, but he couldn't remember the name. "Hell, I can't remember anything—in fact, who am I?" He reopened his eyes, squinting as he looked around. Was he in some kind of hospital? There was a computer giving what he guessed were his vital signs, several empty beds around him, and three others beside him. He looked at his own hands curiously, bending his digits several times. "Garek!" He looked down at the bandage over the left side of his chest, guessing that to be the source of his pain. "Garek! Garek," the owner of the third voice said, practically shouting in his ear.

"A-are you—talking t-to m-me?" he said hoarsely, stuttering from not speaking for so long.

"Shit," the third person said; he was much shorter than the average Sangheili. "He doesn't remember anything, Deza. Not even his fucking name!"

He looked a few inches to his right, seeing a female standing there in robes, a datapad in her hands; he presumed this to be Deza. "I am well aware, Ar'n," she growled. "Now, will you kindly leave so I can get to work? I apparently have much to do!"

The one she had called Ar'n simply grunted and stomped from the room, leaving just him and the female. "You're—very pretty," he said.

She smiled. "Why, thank you. Now, could you tell me your name?"

"Um—no," he said, scratching at the bandage on his chest.

"You are Garek 'Izakee, a Major Domo. You serve with the 482nd Ranger division under the leadership of Ultra Nazo 'Bezatee. Does any of that sound familiar?"

"Vaguelyâ€¦um, could I possibly get something to eat or drink? I am starving_."

She nodded and pulled out a communicator, speaking quietly. "Yuri? It is Dezaâ€¦Yes, he is awake. Listen, could you possibly bring some food to Medical Wing 7-E, Section 4, please? Hold on, I'll ask him," she paused, taking the communicator away from her mouth. "What would you like to eat?"

"Whatâ€¦would I usually want?"

She sighed and brought the communicator back up, "Stewed Kaz'o and water. Thank you, Yuri, see you in a few moments." She smiled at him as she brought up the datapad and a stylus. "Could you tell me what you _do _remember?"

He thought for what felt like an eternity. "I rememberâ€¦watching someone very close to me die, umâ€¦I talked with a female aboutâ€¦something; she looked a lot like youâ€¦" She nodded as he began thinking again. After five minutes, he shook his head. "That is all I can remember."

"Okay. That was actually me you spoke with, about your sleeping patterns. As for the deathâ€¦he was your brother-"

"Tavoâ€¦Tavo 'Rezakee," he interrupted. "I think it's starting to come back to meâ€¦it's like my memories are trapped in a box, slowly breaking free. Ahâ€¦I remember stepping onto a small ship and landing onâ€¦some kind of space stationâ€¦"

He noticed her face take on a somber tone. "That was Halo, the key to the Great Journey. It was destroyed a couple of weeks ago. You were here before then."

"Oh dearâ€¦Where _is _here, exactly?"

"The Holy City, High Charity. Apparently, we're under some kind of probation due to the Supreme Commander's failure to safeguard Halo from the Demon."

"Demon?" he said, his head tilted. "Who is that?"

"This would be so much easier to explain if you could just remember," she sighed.

"Well, perhaps I will remember once I have some food in my belly and some _natural _sleepâ€¦"

"That was the idea. The drugs we used to keep you unconscious were quite strong; they are used for what few surgeries are given to soldiers."

"Did youâ€¦perform surgery on me?" He didn't like the prospect of being cut open while he was sleeping, even if it meant saving his life.

"No, it wasn't a serious injuryâ€¦though, the implications are much more complicated," she said, looking greatly troubled. The look evaporated as the door at the other end of the room opened to reveal

another female in the same robes, though the color of the trim was different than Deza's. The smell of slowly-cooked meat and gravy made it to his nostrils, his stomach answering with a low rumble. She chortled, "I'll leave you be to your meal. Enjoy."

"Deza, ma'am?" he called, she pausing in the doorway and looking back. "Thank you for looking after me."

She smiled warmly, not used to being shown kindness for simply doing her job. "You're very welcome, Sir Garek."

He paused as he turned to his tray, slightly shaking his head afterward; he had never heard such an honorific before. He decided that he would ask her about it later as he tasted the gravy. As he took the first bite, he felt another memory come back to him, reflecting on it as he swallowed the morsel.

**Location: Rural farmland of the Rytar'zoa Keep, City-State of Tarasun border, Sangheiliios**

**Date: January 6, 2540 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Local Time: 18:27 Hours**

A pair of teenage hooves thundered through the beautiful forest at a pace most Sangheili could only dream of achieving. The boy knew he was nearing his destination, his face set in determination to achieve this goal and show up his father. As he hopped over rocks and logs along a path long forgotten, he stopped a smile from forming as his father would take it the wrong way; whether or not the old man did this on purpose didn't matter, it would either equal a beating or degrading remarks. And that depended on his mother; the former if she wasn't around, the latter if she was.

"Just a few more meters," _he thought, seeing the ground begin to slope downward, the bottom of the hill containing the end of this trial and the right for him to wear his prefix. He ducked, then rolled as a _crack-whoosh _sound was heard, narrowly avoiding a poison dart and the subsequent trap that followed with a loud crash behind him. _"That was the last trap, number twenty-five. Not only will I make it through entirely unscathed, but I will also beat the family record." _That brought a small smile to his face; the last to beat the family record on this Right has been his eldest brother, Soha 'Arozakee with a time of three units; approximately five minutes and thirty seven seconds for an eleven mile course which was covered with traps, all of them varying in design, age, and lethality._

The smile instantly disappeared as his left hoof fell into a covered hole, causing him to leave the ground due to the hills now-steep decline. He grunted as he landed in a puddle of mudâ€¦no, not mud. He howled as the skin on his belly began to burn. He instinctively ripped off his tunic and wiped any other parts of his body with the still-dry back; it still stung once he had wiped himself clean, his belly now a sickly silver color. He rested his back against a tree upon standing, swallowing whimpers as his father, Jeka 'Quzak chuckled; his father had never served in the Covenant, as he was a mere surf.

"_What did I tell you, boy? You are destined to fail. You are not, and never will be, military material," he said harshly. "How many

traps were there?"_

"_Twenty-six, you added-"_

"_Wrong! There was, and always have been, twenty-five traps, boy. You obviously miscounted, or are too stupid to remember." The way he was speaking, harshly but lowly, indicated that mother was at the bottom of the hill waiting for them; more for him than for Jeka. "You disappoint me with this failureâ€|hell, you have always disappointed me, boy. You never speak unless I demand it, you cannot tend the fields properly, and you will not build any muscle. To think, I'm stuck with you for life; an honorless, no-name having, pat-"_

"_That is quite enough, Jeka," his mother called. "Come over here, Garek. Let's go get that cleaned and looked at."_

"_Yes ma'am," he said quietly, avoiding his father's gaze as he stepped around him. He felt her look back as she guided him home, an arm around his shoulders. He knew she was mouthing something to Jeka about being a good father for once, his extraordinary hearing picking up her words. "Thank you, motherâ€|but, he may be right."_

She looked down at him; he had yet to reach his full height, standing just a few inches shorter at 7' 9". "No, dear, he is not. He may be my husband, and I love him, but he is a damned fool. He cannot stand knowing that you are better than him, Garek."

"_How am I? Those things he said were facts," he began as they entered the washroom of their home. "I am a shy, scrawny boy that can't do anything right." He was shocked when she actually backhanded him; she had never done such a thing._

"_Keep thinking like that and you will become what he wants you to. You are no failure, Garek; your work in the fields is done properly, the other hands tell me so. You may not be as physically strong as the other boys, but you have something that they do not." She paused, tapping him on the forehead, "You have mental strength; you are far more intelligent than they are. That, and your care for others brings about respect that the other boys aren't gettingâ€|"_

He knew she wanted him to finish the statement, so he spoke. "Because, they are selfish, only caring about themselves; such a mindset will get them killed early in battle."

"_Very good. You have shown them just that in the few spars you have joined them in."_

He smiled proudly, a very rare occurrence. "You have taught me well, mother."

She smiled as well. "Just do not let your father find out. He would likely beat us both for it," she said, a distant look briefly finding its way into her honey-colored eyes. "Garek, there is something that I have been meaning to tell you. Jekaâ€|is n-" she was interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

"_Kir'a, are you almost finished? Garek needs to return to the fields."_

"_No, Jeka, he most certainly does not. In fact, seeing what lengths

you have gone to torment the boy, I believe he needs to remain inside for a few days while this burn heals." _

His growl was audible through the door, "Fine. I will let the other hands knowâ€|"

"_Not that they will mind," she muttered, the two sharing a smirk._

He set the bowl aside as the memory finished playing in his mind. _"She never did tell me," _he thought with a sigh. _"Perhaps it is not for me to knowâ€|"_ His belly now full, he laid back and pulled the thin blanket over his torso. Even though he had been asleep for so long, he was out as soon as his lids dropped. He soon found himself in a dimly-lit room, candles burning on the walls. _"This is impossible," _he thought, recognizing the room he was in from what he had learned as a child.

"I believe the word you are thinking of is improbable," a feminine voice said. He snapped his head around, his eyes looking upon the female; her skin was the same shade as his, though her eyes were a much darker green. "Sit, my son, for we have much to discuss."

He sat opposite her, thinking of what to say; he nearly slapped himself when he blurted, "Who are you?"

She smiled. "That should be obvious," she said, her tone light-hearted. "You recognized this place, so you should tell me."

"It's the Temple of the Warrior, where all of the greatest Sangheili have been buried with the highest honors and recognitionâ€|but, you are not buried here."

"Not officially, no. However, you do know who I am."

He nodded. "You are Zuda, the Warrior Goddess."

"Correct. I know what you are thinking, and this is more than just a dream. This conversation we are havingâ€|is quite real."

"I do not deserve to even be in your presence," he said, head lowered.

"Ah, but you do. There will be time for me to clear that up later, for we must get to the matter at hand." She paused, looking him over. He seemed extremely nervous, yet calm at the same time. "I am not here to judge you, simply to bring you back to reality. It was I that took your memories and locked them away."

"Why?"

"To keep them safe, of course. Now, I am sure that you would like them back, so take my hands." He placed his in hers, but she didn't close them. "This process may be a bit overwhelming, so I will only show you what happened after you went to sleep a few weeks ago. All you need to do is close your eyes," she said, now closing her hands around his. He did as requested and new sounds began to filter out the crackling of the fireâ€|

**Location: Halo, Covenant-controlled valley, Sector 46**

**Local Time: Unknown; Night Cycle**

**Date: September 20, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

Ar'n grumbled to himself as he walked around the camp, on the lookout for anything suspicious. _"I could really use a drink," _he thought with a sad sigh. _"I am sorry for doing the things I do-"_

He was interrupted by a rather loud wail. "_N'rasa a tokeniya!_" He began running toward the familiar sound, knowing that not only was his direct superior in trouble, but his closest friend. He noticed more than a few Sangheili emerge from their quarters wearing only their body suits. "Get it off! Get it _off!_" He slid to a halt in front of Garek's door, keyed in his own personal code, and activated the emergency override. He raised his Carbine as the door opened, not hesitating to shoot the blob-like shape on his chest. Garek looked up at him from the floor, his eyes wild. "Thank you," he said as his eyes slowly closed.

"Damn it," he whispered, looking at his friend's chest; the holes weren't deep, but they bled with the intensity of an arterial vein. He briefly checked vitals, and shouted when he found that Garek was still alive, "Commander! Get a Phantom out here, _now!_"

"Let him be, 'Drakosee. It is-"

Ar'n raised his rifle at Nazo. "Fuck that! Get a Phantom down here! I will not lose someone else, not again! And, definitely _not _to the damned Parasite!" Nazo hesitated, a look of uncertainty on his face. "He would do the same for youâ€|the same for any of us."

"Alright, alright. It should be here within five minutes."

**The Presentâ€|**

Zuda allowed him to watch what little else transpired while he was unconscious; the trip to High Charity, the Ring being destroyed, and the _Seeker of Truth _being grounded. Garek inhaled sharply when she let go of his hands. "Well, that was intense," he said, still not fully comprehending what had happened. "Umâ€|how did the Parasite get on the Ring?"

"It was already there, always had been."

"Then, who released it? The humans?"

"No," Zuda sighed. "One of your brethren didâ€|Anto 'Defrumee."

"I should have known, the foolâ€|Did he get what he deserved?"

"No. He somehow escaped, taking those loyal to him along. And no, I cannot tell you where he went; I may be a goddess, but I cannot watch over every last being at the same time. You cannot begin to understand the difficulty, nor do I expect you to try."

"Then, I will find him one day. By chance or intent, I will find him and-"

"Just let it be, my son. What's done is done, and killing him will not right his wrongs. Well, I am afraid that my time with you is through. I hate having to do thisâ€|but you owe me something."

"Name it."

"All I ask is that you keep searching, Garek. Someday you will find the Other."

"The other what?"

"Good-byeâ€|for now."

Garek awoke, finding someone taking notes by a dim lamp next to his bed. "Deza, what are you doing?" he said quietly.

She flinched, dropping the stylus she had been using to write. "Garek, you startled me. Iâ€|was watching you sleep."

"Why?"

"I came back to get the bowl, andâ€|you were talking to yourself. I mean, your eyes were open and your voice would change pitchâ€|it wasâ€|odd. You kept referring to this 'Zuda', who is she?"

"She is the Warrior Goddessâ€|do you know of the legend?" She shook her head. "Well, when we made first contact with the San 'Shyuum, she was a General of three clans that had united to fight them back. This bit is questionable, but it is said that when some clans had already joined the San 'Shyuum and were sent to destroy her armyâ€|she summoned the power of the Gods themselves to protect those loyal to Good. In return for such power, she had to forfeit her life."

"One life to save many," Deza muttered, he nodding in agreement.

"I suppose the Gods saw fit for her to join their ranks, watching over 'true' warriors."

"Hmmâ€|was it she that gave your memory back?"

"Aye. She took it to begin with, to safeguard it from the Parasite. For what reason, I don't know."

"I see," she said, the two falling silent for a time.

They just sat there, staring into nothing for roughly three hours; Garek couldn't sleep, and he wasn't sure why Deza had stayed, but he didn't mind. "So," he said finally. "What happens next? Do I _have _to lie here, doing absolutely nothing?"

She checked the time, "Well, you will have a physical examination in a few hours. Then, we will move on to recuperating you."

"Recuperating? I feel fineâ€|in fact, I almost feelâ€|younger, stronger."

"Hmm. The Parasite must have gotten into your bloodstream without infecting you somehowâ€|but that's impossible," she muttered.

"Deza, you watched me talk directly to a Goddess; I think what's possible and what isn't has changed."

"I'll only believe it if I take a blood sample."

It was more of a question than a statement. "Deza, you know that I'm not like the others. I won't mind if you take a little bit of blood. Besides, it's the person that's honorable, not their blood. Just don't tell anyone?"

"You have my word. I'll take it during your examination later, but now I think you should get some more rest."

"I can't."

"I hate having to do this, but I can put you back under. It's a small dosage and-"

"Do it, if you feel you must," he interrupted. She nodded and keyed a glyph on her datapad, resulting in a light green liquid to be pushed through a tube connected to his arm; he hadn't even noticed that it was there. The sedative took effect immediately, as he was asleep within seconds.

A few hours later, he mentally sighed as he stood nude in a medical station and followed Deza's simple instructions. He shivered when she turned her back to grab the needle for his blood sample; it felt like it was freezing in the room. A quiet chime caused her to pause. "What are you doing, 'Telam?" It was Nazo, watching from the other side of a holographic wall.

"Just taking a blood sample, your Excellency."

"_Why?"_

"To see if he is carrying the infection in his body."

"_If he were carrying it, he would be one of them."_

"Not necessarily. His bloodline may carry some type of immunity or natural ability to slow the process. Garek, could you hold out your arm for me?"

Garek complied as he said, "Don't worry, sir. She has my consent to do this."

There was an audible sigh, "Proceed, then. Just keep this to yourselves."

Garek suppressed a hiss as the needle entered his arm; he hated the damn things. He watched her place the sample into the terminal within the station. She moved to let him look at the screen, "Well, the infection is certainly there. Do you see what it's doing, Garek?"

He moved to get a closer look, but that didn't help him comprehend what was happening. "My blood is destroying the infection?"

"In a sense; your blood cells are combining with the Parasite's and taking the 'good' traits while removing the 'bad' ones, for lack of better terms. In short, your body is accepting the infection while

also destroying it."

"I still don't understand."

"Think of it this way: you just ate something and your body is taking what energy it can from the food while getting rid of the wasteâ€|only, this works at a _much _higher rate."

"So, my body is making good use of the Parasite?"

"Yes. My guess is that you have a _very _rare gene that allows the Parasite in, grants you the strength, speed, and reflexes, before destroying itâ€|incredible. Your Excellency, we could make use of this."

"_Absolutely not; genetic modification is _unacceptable_, 'Telam. I never said this, but our kind is too proud to allow such a thing to happen."_

"But, think of the advan-

I said no, 'Telam, and that's final. Remember that you are a doctor and not a scientist. Now, are you finished with my Major?"

Her face hardened briefly. "Yes. Forgive my insolence, I was out of line."

Garek looked at himself, not seeing any change to his structure. "I still don't understand it. I feel stronger, but I don't look it. Strange."

"I guess you're not meant to understand it. Perhaps someone is looking out for you?" She looked at him with her head tilted.

"Perhapsâ€|now, where is my clothing? It's damn cold in here."

Deza chortled. "In the trunk, over there. It has to be kept cold in these stations so bacteria can't survive. I am used to it, I suppose."

"Hmm, at least it isn't as cold as winter time in my keep. Have you ever seen snow, Deza?"

"No. It gets just as cold in the village I come from, but it usually just rains. You know this, Garek. You have been to K'zhon during the winter."

He paused as he tucked the white tunic into his shorts. He grabbed his maroon vest as he said, "How do you know that?"

"Please, Garek. Don't think I didn't figure out where my sister Anya was going every time your father sent you. She misses you, you know?"

He blushed faintly. "I do as wellâ€|but, we are just friends."

"Is that why she wept when you left for service?" She was no longer smiling, her face now serious. "You hurt her, Garek."

He sighed. "I know. But, she knew it was going to happen, just the same as I did."

"Indeed, and she forgave you. She recently sent me a message."

"Did she?"

She nodded. "She said that she would like to see you again, whenever it is that we get to return home."

"I will do that. Where to next?"

"You're free to go. Oh, don't leave the district," she said as he stood in the doorway.

"Why?"

"Order from the High Council of Masters. It is part of our fleet's probation, I suppose."

"Oh...farewell for now, then."

"Farewell. I'll tell Anya about your promise."

He smiled. "Thank you." The smile vanished as the door closed behind him, thoughts of a relationship long since passed. He shook his head to chase the thoughts away, and they left without resistance. _"It was nice, but it was far from loveâ€|wasn't it?"_ He frowned as he looked around the street outside, seeing that this was a mostly Sangheili district; they were only a few Unggoy waddling about here and there. "Excuse me, miss?" he said, stopping a female as she passed.

She stopped and smiled politely, "Yes?"

He paused; she was beautiful. "Ermâ€|do you know where the soldiers from the _Fleet of Particular Justice_ are staying?"

"You mean being held," she said with mild disgust; he could tell that it wasn't for the fleet, but for the people making them stay put. "The apartments you are looking for are ten blocks that way," she pointed to a street to their left. "There should be some Guardsmen outside, you cannot miss it."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You are quite welcome. If you do not mind my asking, what is the name of this kind man that stands before me?"

He chuckled quietly at the wording of her question. "Garek 'Izakee, Major Domo with the 482nd Ranger Division."

Her smile widened slightly. "Well Garek, I am Shara 'Hesum, a doctor at this district's clinic. May I ask another question?"

"Of course," he said with a shrug.

"May I walk with you? It is only a small detour from my home."

Before he could answer, a younger male called out, "Shara? Where did you run off to?"

He heard her stifle a sigh. "Coming brother! Well, perhaps some other time then?"

"I think I would enjoy that," he said with a smile. "Farewell, Shara 'Hesum."

"Farewell, Garek 'Izakee." He watched her disappear into the crowd before walking in the direction she had indicated, suddenly feeling alone. "Strangeâ€¦ just that brief conversation felt right. Zuda, are you trying to tell me something?" _he thought, looking toward the false sky. About four blocks from the apartments, he began seeing familiar faces, though he didn't actually know many of them. He shared brief nods with a few, but he could tell that none were willing to speak with him.

"Garek! Garek, over here!"

He looked to his right, seeing Ar'n, Rotje, and Z'aes exiting a restaurant. He caught a glimpse of Tajo 'Szemee and Nazo seated within while Rotje said, "You're alive?"

"I believe so, brother. Where's Orna?"

Ar'n and Z'aes took on sullen looks. "Dead," the former said quietly. "The Parasite took him after you and I left the Ring."

"Is this true, Z'aes?"

"Aye, I had to kill him or I wouldn't be here, either."

"You did what you had to, Z'aes. When it comes to the Parasite, it is kill or be killed; if a friend or comrade is infected, they aren't who they once were," Rotje said.

"Yeahâ€¦"

"You seem to know quite a bit about the subject, Rotje."

"Well Garek, unlike you, I witnessed the horrors first-hand. Do you remember Major 'Vesatee?"

"Which one was he again?"

"The one that actually liked you."

"Oh, right. He's gone?"

Rotje nodded. "I shot him as he was turningâ€¦ poor bastard."

Garek sighed, "How many others?"

"Countless," Nazo said suddenly. "So many deadâ€¦ for nothing."

"They didn't know it was for nothing when they passed, Nazo. It is we that have to put up with grim reality of it all," Tajo said. "The shit is about to hit the fan, as the humans would say."

"Humph, for being what they are, humans have a lot of little sayings like that," Rotje commented. "I agree, things aren't going to go well for us. Reassignment, demotions, some of us being sent back home without honorâ€¦"

"All of you will be fine. I am taking responsibility; I have to, as the Supreme Commander."

"Your Excellency-"

"I have a name, Tajo. Use it while you still have the chance."

"Thel, do you have any idea what they will do to you?"

"A few hours of torture before they cut me open and hang me by my entrails. Then my body will be showcased like someâ€¦piece of meat in the markets," he said bluntly, a hint of disgust mixed in. "But, I am willing to go through it so that you may carry on the legacy. We _will_ have another chance at the Journey. Farewell brothersâ€¦walk the path."

"Always," Nazo and Tajo nodded before Thel walked off. "He doesn't have a clue. The bastards will tear him to shreds," the former said.

"Nazo, show a little more respect, eh? He is placing his neck on the chopping block so we don't have to."

"I know, Tajo, and I do respect him for it. That does not mean that I like it," he scoffed, "Waste of a Supreme Commander. Gods only know who they will find to replace him."

"I think I heard him speaking with someone in the mess hall on our trip back here. Someone he called Insa," Z'aes said.

"Insa 'Alvotee, humph."

"You know him?"

"I know of him, yes. An arrogant bastard of a Zealot, he tries to push his aristocratic status onto every female he comes across. Aye, he is _that_ desperate for some female attention," Tajo said, shaking his head. "It's a pitiful display to watch, really."

"Don't they have to lay with him, being an aristocrat?" Rotje said.

"Well, if we were home, it would matter. In this day and age, swordsmen are rare and the females are becoming resistant. Unlike most, Nazo and I want to keep our status to ourselves."

"Why?"

"Because, I don't need it. And, Nazo isn't truly an aristocrat, just a swordsman."

"I am not _just_ a swordsman, I'm a _left-handed_ swordsman. Do you know how difficult it is to spar when the vast majority prefers to

use their right hand?" When Ar'n suppressed a snicker, "What's so funny, boy?"

"I'm sorry, my mind just went to a horrible place for a moment."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wellâ€|that had 'innuendo waiting to happen' written all over it."

"Gods above, Nazo. I think one of your Minors might be perverted," Tajo said lightly.

"Or just immature. Has life so far taught you nothing, boy?"

"It has taught me many things, _sir_," he retorted flatly. "You should try to make yourself laugh sometimes, for instance. Don't worry about trivial thingsâ€|that revenge isn't always the best option." He shrugged, "Just to name a few."

They continued to chat, moving from subject to subject, but Garek tuned out most of it. He was more concerned with what he had missed, what he could have possibly done, if anything, to change what was happening now, and finally, what was to become of them all. He knew the Prophets were liars, Zuda's appearance proved that much to him. His mind wandered to what she had meant by "the Other"; who or what could it be? He sighed, getting the others attention. "Is something bothering you, brother," Rotje said.

"Hmm? Oh, no, I'm tired is all."

"Still?" Ar'n said incredulously. "After all of the sleep you just awoke from?"

"He had to deal with a lot today, 'Drakosee. I think he means mental fatigue, not physical," Nazo said. "Besides, the curfew is about to take effect."

"Curfew?"

"Yes, part of our probation," Tajo chimed in. "I suppose they think we will try to free the Supreme Commander and do something stupid."

"What? We just talked to him a couple of minutes agoâ€|"

"We may not have seen them, but he is under close watch by a guard detail; they dress in civilian clothing so they are not discovered. They may even be watching us as we speak."

"I doubt that, Tajo. It's their duty to watch him, not us," Nazo said, Garek seeing him look around through the corners of his eyes.

Tajo shrugged. "You never know. Well, have a good rest, Garek. If you want a word, just ask for me or Nazo."

Garek nodded. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

9. Chapter VII: Second Chances

Chapter VIII: Second Chances

_**Location: Apartment Block #46, District 4, High
Charity**_

**Date: November 3, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Station Clock: 03:30 Hours**

Garek sighed, staring at the ceiling of the apartment he had been assigned; it felt more like a prison and he was sure several others shared that feeling. He had had some good times while staying here, but the grim reality of why they were in this building overrode those memories. He thought back to what Ar'n recently revealed to him when two guardsmen had, almost literally, dumped him at his doorway; being bored as he was, all he _could _do was think.

**5 days earlierâ€|**

Garek leaned through the doorway of the washroom, hearing a thud followed by a pained cry out in the hallway. He finished cleaning his teeth and dressed, deciding to see what the commotion was. He opened the door to find two Honor Guards waiting patiently on the other side, a bruised and bloody form on the floor between them.
"Yes?"

"This Minor was found out in the street and said that he wanted to speak with you immediately. Take this drunken idiot and keep him inside before he gets into trouble that is more genuine." The two left without another word and Garek looked to the form lying on the floor. He knelt down and turned the Sangheili's face toward him, barely recognizing who it was.

"Ar'nâ€|Ar'n, can you hear me?"

"Of course I can, you damn idiot. I am not dead yet." He was slurring heavily and he reeked of whiskey; whether the slur was more from the alcohol or his broken mandibles, Garek wasn't sure. "Are you going to let me in or leave me lying here like an asshole?"

"I just might leave youâ€|unless you can convince me not to," he said, standing and looking down at him.

Ar'n laid his head back on the floor, grunting as his sore muscles moved. "I need help," he said softly.

"That much is clear," he returned bluntly.

"Why are acting like Nazo so suddenly? I am breaking my own morals and asking someone for helpâ€|you, specifically."

"Because you waited far too long to admit that you had a problem; I suppose that it took getting your ass kicked for you to finally realize it yourself. Now, get up."

"I can'tâ€|"

"Yes, you can. Get up."

"Are you trying to humiliate me?"

"I don't need to, you took care of that yourself," he sighed, extending a hand down. "Come on." Ar'n accepted it and Garek picked him up and guided him to the washroom. "Sit," he said, setting him down on the toilet. He retrieved his pack and began rummaging for a small kit he had gotten from the local clinic, "Hold still while I clean up these wounds." He applied a salve to a small cloth and touched it to a gash just over Ar'n's left eye.

He howled and swatted Garek's hand away. "Bitch! What is that, liquid fire?"

Garek instantly grew impatient. "I said, hold still. Do you want my help or not?" He huffed, "I might have gotten it in your eye." Ar'n shook his head and complied, hissing quietly or grunting with each cut that was sanitized. Then, out came the needle.

"What the hell are you doing with that?" Ar'n said warily.

"You need stitches for the cut over your eye."

"Then, send me to Deza or Yuri. They're qualified to do such a thing."

"No. Having nothing else to do, I had Deza show me a couple of things."

"You didn't, "

"Just basic stuff, like stitches, now, hold still. I mean it this time; I don't want to put this through your eye." He touched the tip to one end of the gash, "Are you ready?" Ar'n closed his mandibles tightly and nodded, Garek immediately going to work. It must not have been as bad as he thought, because Ar'n didn't do anything to indicate pain. "Done. The others aren't that bad and should be healed in a couple of days. Go in the common area and sit." Ar'n complied as he walked down the hall to Nazo's door, lightly knocking on it.

Nazo answered, wearing just pants and a sword hilt in hand. "Yes, 'Izakee?" he said, breathing heavily.

"I need to show you something, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, was just practicing some sword forms. Is it urgent?"

"I would say so, Ar'n," he finished to Nazo's tilted head.

"Give me a moment and I'll be right over," he said, closing the door immediately.

Garek returned to find Ar'n in the same spot, looking greatly troubled about something. "Where did you go?" he said, his slur greatly reduced; he must have reset his mandibles when he had stepped out.

"To inform Nazo of your current condition."

"Why? I want your help, not his. I doubt he even cares about me, anyway."

"As a matter of fact, I do care, boy. Well, well, quite the mess you've made of yourself."

"Stop calling me that! I am not your son!" he spat.

Garek glanced to Nazo, who actually lookedâ€|hurt? "What happened, Ar'n?" he said.

"What do you think happened? I went out drinking, picked a fight, and lost. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"I am far from impressed, 'Drakosee. Our reputation is already in bad standing, and you going around picking fights while intoxicated certainly doesn't help the matter," Nazo said, crossing his arms.

"I don't give a damn about the Rangers' reputation. We're already disgraced for what one of our so-called brothers did; one person fucked it up for all of us!"

Nazo growled. "Thank you for reporting this to me, 'Izakee. Do what you can for the stupid whelp."

"Yes sir." He shook his head when the door closed. "Why do you do this to yourself, Ar'n? I know it's something from your past."

"It's none of your business."

"I am making it my business; you came to me for help, and I believe I have an idea of where this problem began. All I need is for you to give me the specifics."

Ar'n stared blankly at the wall for a few minutes before speaking sadly, "You're right, it does have to do with my past. Remember when I said 'I may be young, but I've had my share'?" Garek simply nodded. "Wellâ€|I had a consort back home for about a year before I went to Academy. She w-wasâ€|" He paused, rubbing his face in attempt to keep the tears at bay. "Iâ€|I can'tâ€|"

"You lost her, yes?" Ar'n nodded. "It's okay, Ar'n. You just need to take the time to properly grieveâ€|and move on."

"I have triedâ€|it's justâ€|it's just too great."

"Ar'n, I can't help you if I don't know the full story. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Justâ€|ask again in a few hours. Can I stay here?"

Garek nodded, "Go get some rest. I assure you that I'll be here when you awaken." He closed the bedroom door behind the shorter Sangheili, immediately hearing him slump to the floor and sob.

When Ar'n had awakened, he did tell Garek everything. He helped his friend as best he could, giving what advice he could before demanding that Ar'n stop drinking, to which he had agreed. He was still thinking about what had happened when there was a knock at his door.

Nazo was on the other side, a small smile on his face. "Get geared up, 'Izakee."

"Why?"

"Do you believe in second chances?"

"Well yes, but what does that-"

"They found another one. The Journey is about to-"

"Save me the Journey talk, sir. It's ridiculous," Garek interrupted, though his tone wasn't harsh or angry. "In all honesty, if what the Prophets say is true, then the humans would not have stopped our forces. I'm not trying to disrespect you or your belief in itâ€¦just don't try to push them on me."

Nazo blinked before continuing, "Anyway, I have been given an assignment and was wondering if you would like to come along. It is strictly voluntary."

Garek chuckled at how Nazo seemed unfazed by his heresy; if it had been any other Sangheili, sans his friends, he would likely be a corpse lacking a head. "At best," he reminded himself. "No, I think I'll stay here. This place may be a prisonâ€¦but the down time is nice," he said lightly, eliciting a chortle from Nazo; he had really lightened up since they had arrived and everyone had taken notice.

"Indeed it is," he agreed. "The choice was yours to make, and you made it. Well, farewell. I will return very soon."

As the Ultra moved quickly down the hall, Garek called to him, "Good luck!" The Ultra simply paused and gave a brief nod of thanks before disappearing in an elevator. He took notice of a change in the hallway; there were no longer Honor Guards at the elevator or stairwell, just simple security officers. He approached one, the guard instantly reaching for the rifle on his hip. "Relax, I just have a question," he said slowly. The officer tensely nodded for him to continue. "What happened to the Guardsmen?"

"Did you not hear? The Guard has been replaced."

"What? By who?"

"The Jiralhanae," he spat, disgusted by simply speaking the word. "The Prophets replaced the Guard with Brutes because Regret was murdered by the Demon."

"When did this happen?"

"The Guard was changed over roughlyâ€¦six hours ago. Seeing as the Jiralhanae are not allowed in this district by request of the High Council of Masters, we are tasked with overseeing the lot of you until your probation is lifted."

"Do you have any idea when that will be?" Ar'n suddenly said from behind Garek. "I am ready to reenter the battlefield, wherever it may be."

"It will be lifted when the Third Cycle ends today. Even then, it will be some time before you are reassigned. There is a war out there, you know."

"A war _we _would be fighting if the Coun-" Ar'n was interrupted by Garek swatting him on the snout. "What the _hell _was that for?"

"Thank you for your time, officer. We will just be going now." The officer simply nodded as Garek leaned in and whispered, "Watch what you say about the Council around the general populace. Remember that we are a minority here."

"Sorry. You know how I amâ€¦"

He nudged him in the side. "Sometimes I wish I didn't." Ar'n laughed and pushed him away.

"You ass."

"Oh, if you're ready for battle, why didn't you go with Nazo?"

"Wait, what? He got an assignment?"

"Yes, he came and asked me if I wanted to go along, but I said no."

"He didn't come to meâ€¦I wonder if it's because of what I said the other day. I cannot believe that he still thinks that I'm his son. We are _nothing _alike."

"Then explain the picture."

"It's obviously fake."

"Or, you're in denial."

"Whatever, Garek. You know what it would take for me to believe that he really is my father."

"Your mothers word, because she was never known to tell a lie," Garek affirmed. "Though the key words in that statement are 'never known'; it doesn't mean she never did."

"I still stand by it. If she lied to me, it was either by accident or she was lied to herself. That much I know for certain."

Garek sighed, thinking of a way to resolve this small conflict. Though he knew it really _was _none of his business, he couldn't help it; it was in his nature to try, no matter what. "What about a blood test?"

"How about you shut the hell up before I hit you?" Ar'n grunted. "Must you be so stubborn about this?"

"I am simply trying to help resolve the situation. We do _not _need infighting, Ar'n, not in our current state."

Ar'n sighed. "Look, I know you want to help, and I appreciate the concernâ€|but some things are just better left alone. I believe it was you who told me that."

"Well, I guess we're both hypocrites, then."

"I guess so."

They remained silent for a time, simply walking through the ever-growing crowds in the street outside. "Hmm, I wonder where Rotje is. I haven't spoken to him in a whileâ€|"

"I think I saw him in the park through my window. Deza was with him."

"How long ago?"

"It was right before I stepped into the hallway and found you talking to that officer. They might still be there," he shrugged.

Garek smirked, a mischievous glint in his eye. "We still have access to our armor, right?"

"Yeah, no weapons or shields, though. Why?"

"Would you like to play a prank?"

That same smirk and glint appeared on Ar'n's face. "Do tell."

About ten minutes later, they were both crouched behind a boulder in the park, listening to Rotje and Deza talk idly on a bench a few meters away. "And that's about it for my childhood. What about yours?" Deza said softly; the two were sitting very close, she had her head on his shoulder and he had arm over hers.

Garek heard Ar'n suppress a grunt. "I can almost taste the hormones. It's making my head hurt," he whispered. "What are we going to do, anyway?"

"Can you change the pitch of your voice and it be believable?"

"How is this?" he said, a tone just higher than normal.

"Excellent," Garek whispered back, making his tone deeper; the two of them could pass for different people, given that they kept their helmets on. Garek waved for them to move around the two.

They remained unseen as Rotje continued telling Deza of his past. "I had several acquaintances, but I suppose Garek was my only true friend. Hell, I went to see him so much, I might as well have lived in his home. I am sure that Kir'a would have let me stay if Jeka wasn't such an asshole."

"His mother and father?" Deza said when he paused.

"Yes. Whenever Jeka wasn't around, I did stay there until the day before he would return. I know that they see as a member of their familyâ€|and I gladly accept that, seeing as I have none of my own."

"Surely you have brothers or sisters?"

"If I do, I don't know about themâ€|because I'm an orphan."

"What?"

"My maternal uncle had told me that I was left on his doorstep, not even able to speak yet. He was a good man; taught me discipline, how to and when to be polite or blunt, and he introduced me to the 'Zak lineage.

Garek and I would go into Tarasun, on the rare occasion that he didn't have to tend the fields, and cause trouble. Well, it was me who did most of the trouble-making; he was too shy to go into some public place and do the things I did," he said, chuckling. "If I got caught, he would always choose that time to be sociable and bail me out. He has always been there for meâ€|and I have yet to return the favor."

"Yes you have. Remember when he lost his brother?"

"I didn't make him feel any better like he had always done me. He's very hard to reason with when he's angry or sad."

"Well, at least you tried, hmm? You and I both know that he appreciated it."

Rotje sighed, "Yeah, I guess you're right. Listen, Deza, we have been getting to know each other for some time nowâ€|and, I think I-" he was interrupted by Deza licking the side of his face, the Sangheili equivalent to a kiss. He sat still and blinked for several moments; surprised not only by her action, but that it was in a public place. He looked around in hope that nobody had seen, only to be disappointed as two Rangers, a Major and a Minor, began approaching; the Minor was rather short but heavily built, while the Major was average height and lean. "Let me handle this," he whispered. "Good morning, brothers. May I help you-"

"No public displays of affection in the park," the taller one interrupted. "In fact, I should report you. Who is your superior officer?"

"Field Marshall Tajo 'Szemee. Go ahead and report it, he knows where I am and who I am with."

Meanwhile, Ar'n was speaking with Deza. "I need you to come with me. Females do not belong in the park."

"What the hell are you talking about, you runt? I can be where I damn-well please."

They kept at it until both Rotje and Deza simultaneously shouted in frustration, "Just who the hell are you?" That was when the laughter started; they laughed until Ar'n had doubled over on the ground and Garek was holding onto his left side. Deza and Rotje exchanged strange looks before the latter said, "The question still stands."

Garek simply removed his helmet and grinned. "You should have seen

the looks on your faces."

"What was this, some kind of joke?" Deza said.

"Yes, it was," Rotje said. "After all the stunts we pulled in the past, that's the best you could come up with, Garek? I must say, I'm disappointed."

"As you said, you caused most of the troubleâ€¦and came up with most of the plans. Not bad for spur of the moment, though eh?"

Rotje finally smiled and shook his head. "You had me going, I can't deny that. But Ar'n, Deza was about to beat your little ass into the ground...and this is such a lovely park. Wouldn't want to ruin it by having your blood all over the placeâ€¦"

"Are you two really that bored? That you have to pull a prank on two people who are enjoying themselves?" Deza said hotly.

"Yes, Deza, we are that bored," Garek admitted without shame. "Soâ€¦you and Rotje?"

"Yes, Deza and Iâ€¦and you saw it coming," Rotje said, finally returning her gesture from earlier. "You are able to read people _too _well, brother."

"Sometimes, I wish I wasn't able. Maybe then, more things would surprise me."

"Well, the mood is ruined," Rotje said suddenly. "Thanks, you two."

"You're quite welcome," Ar'n said lightly, giving a bow. "Carry on."

As they walked away from the couple, they heard Deza whisper, "I can change that very quickly, you knowâ€¦"

"Ehâ€¦I don't want to rush things, Deza. We should give ourselves more time to make up our mindsâ€¦"

"Don't wait too long," Garek said over his shoulder. "Another ring has been discovered."

The rest of the week was uneventful, which had become a normality. While he was lazily reading reports on the Battle Net, his terminal chimed, telling him that he had received a message that had been marked 'urgent'. He had a strange feeling that he knew who it was from and what it contained, but he checked it nonetheless. His suspicions rang true when the header read: Kir'a 'Defum, urgent to Garek 'Izakee. He keyed the proper glyph and opened the message, sighing as he read.

"_Garek, we just received the full details of Tavo's deathâ€¦why did you not tell us what had happened? Do not lie this time; we know you were thereâ€¦_

_ -Kir'a 'Defum"_

Garek knew that it had been his father who had typed the message

using his mother's profile; the tone and wording said it all to him, and messages that were sent through the Battle Net were automatically signed as the owner of the profile, no matter who was actually using it. He frowned, knowing that he would have to be brutally honest this time around.

"_I have no excuse for my actionsâ€¦|_"

I was not able to avenge his death, and I hate myself every day for it.

I suppose that I did not tell you becauseâ€¦|I could not find the means to do so. I apologize for not correcting my mistakeâ€¦|and pray that you both will forgive me.

_ -Garek 'Izakee_

_P.S. I know you will see this father, but I do not careâ€¦|I miss home, mother. The craving for battle quickly fades when you witness the horrors that lie within it." _He hesitated as his finger hovered over the 'send' glyph, the knowledge that Jeka would only ridicule him ever-present in his mind. He truly didn't care what his father said or thought of him, but he knew that mother did and that she had almost snapped at Jeka quite a few times prior to Garek leaving for his service. _"If I do not care, why am I hesitating?" _he thought. Finally, he pressed the glyph and sent the message.

It was less than a moment before he received a reply. _"Do not hate yourself for it, my son; these things happen in war, and we are not the only family to receive messages. You and Rotje are the last surviving soldiers from our keep, Garek. The field hands and I pray for your safe return every night._

I do not hold anything against you, though the same cannot be said of your father. Did you, at the very least, recover the gem I gave him? If so, keep it; you will need it more than we do. I am sure you miss home, but you and I both know there are only a choice-few ways that you can return, none of them good. Have strength, my son, I know in my hearts that you will survive and return one day.

_ -Kir'a 'Defum"_

He stared at the holographic screen for several hours, unsure of how to reply. Surely he and Rotje weren't the _final _soldiers from the Rytar'zoa Keep; there were other children learning the arts of warâ€¦|weren't there? Several questions arose in his mind, quickly growing more and more frustrated with himself, all because he had mentioned one thing: home. But, was it even home any longer? How much had changed in the nine years since he left Sangheilios to serve this Covenant? He paced for several hours before coming to a conclusion. "No, this is my home now. My fellow Sangheili are my brothers, my family. And nothing will change that," he said to himself.

"You're thinking about home too, eh?" Ar'n said suddenly, Garek turning sharply to face him.

"Do you not believe in announcing your presence before entering someone's quarters?"

"Umâ€¦|your door was wide open, so I let myself in," he shrugged.

"Humph, I know Juz'n hasn't changed and that it likely never will. Although I consider fellow warriors to be family, I will never think of this as home. We may be warriors, but that does not mean our home has to be a battlefield, Garek."

"Then, why are you always so eager to enter it?"

Ar'n frowned. "You know why. The thrill of battle reminds me that I'm still aliveâ€|while others are not. It keeps me occupiedâ€|from thinking about those others." He sighed sadly, "My life has never been easy, Garek. I have almost had to fight to merely survive before I could even comprehend what was happening around me. I have had to do terrible things, just so mother could put food on the table and keep a roof over our heads. Do you know why I'm so good at what I do?"

"Because you have been trained to do it?"

"Yes and no. Joining the military only honed my skills, but I already had them. I was a thief, Garek; it was all I knew and it was the only way I could live. Food, clothingâ€|you name it, I stole it."

"But you only took things that you would need?"

"For the most part. Sometimes I stole jewelry or other items of value, just to keep the groundskeeper from kicking us into the street. You must think I'm a terrible personâ€|"

"No. What you have done _are _crimes, but you had the best of intentions when you carried them out. Life is a challenge, Ar'n, and each individual one is different."

"Yeahâ€|"

They remained silent for a time, neither of them really having anything further to say on the matter. "Soâ€|anything new happening?"

"As far as?" Ar'n said curiously.

"Do you know how operations are going on the Ring?"

"The Prophet of Regret is dead, murdered by the Demon. There are talks of increased hostility between our kind and the Jiralhanae. I fear that this is the beginning of the end, Garek."

"I think you may be right. Things have only escalated since the first Ring was destroyed; I see fewer people in the streets every day, replaced by security officers. Children no longer play, their parents no longer smiling. If the worse comes to worst, I will not go down without a fight."

"You and me both," Ar'n agreed. "How is your English coming along?"

"I am still having trouble with certain words; pronunciations and syllables, mostly," he said, using the very language Ar'n had mentioned. "Why?"

"The way I see itâ€|we may need to use it."

"Why would we need to use a human language?"

"If worse comes to worst," he said simply. "You're getting better, but you need to try to keep from warbling and hissing so much. Speak slowly and just practice until you get it right."

"Could you help me for a little while, then? A second opinion is always nice."

"No problem." Ar'n set a book on the table between them, "This is a dictionary I had made, in secret of course. It has basic words and the translation to Common next to them. There is no telling how much time we have, so let's begin." Ar'n started with holding the dictionary and having Garek just repeat the words he said before handing the book over and telling to try and read words out of it, in English. Garek struggled greatly at first, but his natural ability to adapt quickly caught up with him and he began listing words much faster than Ar'n had anticipated. He eventually fell silent, just allowing Garek to speak; he would only interrupt if Garek began saying a word, then pausing as he tried to work out the pronunciation.

"Parâ€|partiâ€|," he sighed. "Ar'n, this wordâ€|it says it's an 's sound', but is spelled with a c?"

Ar'n took the dictionary and looked to where Garek had pointed. "That would be participate. Some words do that, Garek. Participate."

"Parr-tissuh-payt?" he said slowly.

"There you go. Continue," he said handing the dictionary back. This went on for another hour before they moved on to grammar and sentence structure. They continued into the early hours of the Third Cycle, Ar'n speaking as he began to doze off, "Alright, that's enough. It's late, I'm sure that both of our heads hurt, and most importantlyâ€|I am damn tired."

"Yeah. See you in a few hours, Ar'n," Garek said as the shorter Sangheili walked toward the door.

"In the morning," he returned with a yawn.

Garek crawled into bed, the familiar coolness of it suddenly feeling alien to him. He quickly shook the feeling and closed his eyes, a vision beginning as soon as he fell asleep.

He had no idea that what it entailed would arrive _much_ sooner than he thoughtâ€|

10. Chapter IX: A House, Divided

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**Location: Apartment Block #46, District 4, High Charity**

**Date: November 4, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Station Clock: 07:46 Hours**

Garek was graciously awakened to the feeling of his blanket being yanked off of his body. "Get up!"

He groaned, not comprehending the urgent tone in Ar'n's voice; he had only gotten an hours rest due to his vision. "How about you put the damn blanket back and go away?"

Ar'n growled and fired his carbine into the synthetic headboard, Garek lashing out with a hoof instinctually. The blow connected with the shorter Sangheili's chest, he coughing and falling to the floor. "You fucking-"

"You shot at me, idiot!" Garek interrupted furiously, "How the hell did you expect me to react? Now, what requires such urgency that you would _take a shot_ at me while I am sleeping?" Garek saw fear in Ar'n's eyes as the latter looked up; he had never seen Garek so angry before.

"The Prophetsâ€|they have ordered the Jiralhanae to _exterminate _our kind."

Garek hauled him to a standing position and pushed him toward the door. "Then, go warn the others and wait for me out in the street! Go!" He had no idea why Ar'n's action had infuriated him, but he found himself unable to calm down. He simply paced and growled at a wall for a few minutes, trying and failing to quell his rage. Finally, he roared and punched the wall, leaving a dent in the synthetic material. _"I wonder if what happened to me has something to do with it," _he thought as he looked over his hand; he had busted his knuckles open and they bled profusely for a short moment before the skin began to knit itself back together. His anger dissipated, only to be replaced by curiosity and confusion. "The hell?" he muttered, opening and closing his hand as he looked at it; small scars remained where the skin had split and he no longer felt the pain from hitting the wall.

Though he knew why his body had healed so quickly, he was still greatly confused by the fact as he put on and prepped his armor. He waited for his shields to charge before stepping into the hall and looking around. He saw and heard nothing apart from the alarm wailing in the streets outside, so he decided to sniff the air. He shrugged and hastily made for the exit, finding that fifteen of his fellow Rangers, about ten soldiers from the 349th, Deza 'Telam and Yuri 'Fazor and other medical personnel that he had never met before, and a couple of security officers waiting for him. "We are going to need some weapons," he said, looking to the higher ranking of the two officers.

"I cannot allow-"

"Listen, asshole," Ar'n cut in. "I don't think your regulations apply anymore. What do you expect us to do, just allow the Jiralhanae slaughter us? I'm not sure about you, but I will _not _die without trying to defend myself!"

Several of the others shouted in agreement as he and Garek shared a nod. "Show them where the armory is," Garek said.

"Of course, Major. Follow me."

"What about you, Garek?" Deza said; she, Yuri, and Ar'n had stayed behind.

"There is something I must do. Ar'n."

"Sir?"

Garek motioned him closer, speaking quietly, "Grab a weapon and plenty of ammunition. Take these two and Rotje, and secure a dropship for us, a Phantom preferably."

"Alright. What are you going to do?" he whispered.

"I'm going to try to find some other survivors. If I don't make it to you in five minutes, assume the worst and leave this place." He held his right hand out and Ar'n clasped it, they bumping shoulder pads afterward. "Get to it."

"Consider it done. See you in the hangar bay."

Garek nodded and took off at a run, a look of grim determination on his face as he put his helmet on. He passed several security officers that were heading in the same direction he was, toward the main entrance to District 4. He tuned out the indistinct shouting of orders from them and continued running, breaking away from them as he turned toward his destination: the local clinic.

He froze when he saw it. Both of the officers that were posted outside lay dead on either side of the door, small holes through their skulls. He immediately recognized the marks as those of his preferred weapon, a Type-50 SRS; Beam Rifle, as the humans simply called it. He scanned the buildings opposite the clinic as he picked up one of the fallen Type-25 DERs, thinking that a Kig-Yar may already be in the district. Seeing nothing, he moved inside only to see purple blood sprayed across the wall behind the desk in the lobby. "Hello?" he called, charging the rifle's core. He looked behind the desk and immediately wished he hadn't; the body of a nurse lay dead in the floor, her throat cut open. He could tell it was done with an energy sword. _"Gods, why would a Sangheili come into a Sangheili clinic and kill everyone?"_ he thought as he looked through the doorway beyond the desk, seeing familiar sights at each bed. He looked through the corpses sadly, looking for one female in particular. He breathed a sigh of relief upon completing his search and briefly prayed for the victims.

He began to head to the nearest hangar bay when he heard a faint sob, pausing to judge the distance and direction. He ran to his right, the cries growing louder with each stride he took. He soon rounded a corner with his rifle raised, only to lower it when he saw a female weeping over the corpse of a Minor. A Zealot lay a few feet away, what Garek guessed to be its own sword stabbed through its chest; a plasma rifle was resting in the Zealot's hand. The female had yet to notice his presence as he looked at the Minor; his wounds didn't match the scene, for he had wounds from a human assault rifle in his chest and head. He tilted his head as he finally noticed the name on his HUD; it read 'Reke 'Rosumee, Deceased' when he looked at the corpse. _"â€|'Rosumee,"_ he thought, instantly recognizing the family

name. "Shara 'Hesumâ€|is that you?" he said softly.

"Where have I heard that voice before?" she said hoarsely, not looking away from the Minor. "Why are you here, Garek 'Izakee? Why are not fighting the Jiralhanae?"

"I went to the clinic in search of survivorsâ€|then, I heard you. Listen, we can't stay here."

"I will not leave him behind. He comes with us, or I stay behind," she said, finally looking up at him.

"He is deadâ€|and so will you, if you stay here. He would want you to be safe, yes?"

"Yes."

"Then, come. I may have a way off of this station," he said, keeping that soft tone as he extended a hand to her. She nodded and took it, he helping her stand. "I'm sure he is grateful."

"Perhaps," she said quietly as they walked.

He glanced at her, making sure she didn't notice his movement; she had her head lowered and tears still fell, but she wasn't sobbing any longer. He opened a comm link with Ar'n and spoke, "Ar'n, give me a report."

"_We're still searching, Garek. It looks like most of the dropships have either left or haven't yet returned from previous assignments. Don't worry, the countdown hasn't started yet."_

"Good. Keep searching, brother."

"Turn, you cowardly heretic," a voice suddenly growled.

Garek complied and saw two familiar Sangheili standing with sword hilts in their hands; one had a Type-50 clipped to his back. "Well, it's none other than Anto 'Defrumee and Ralo 'Grodasee," he said, giving a growl of his own. "Shara, keep walking. I can handle these two," he whispered.

"Are you certain?"

"Go. I will not be long." She nodded and continued down the street, pausing to look back a few times. "A cowardly heretic, am I? I believe you should look in a mirror, Anto."

"How is taking an order from a Councilor heresy?" he sneered. "His wisdom has taught me many things. We should remain loyal to the Prophets, even in light ofâ€|recent events, for instance."

"Oh, that _is_ brilliant, Anto. Remain loyal to greedy, lying filth that have ordered our kinds extermination; remain loyal to something that is a _complete _lie. You know, I used to think that you had some intelligence, but now I see that you are nothing more than a mindless tool, following the word of a blind Councilor who is no better than the San 'Shyuum. You are just as power-hungry and dishonest as they are, _your Excellency_, " he said, spitting the last words. Ralo's mandibles curled into an ugly scowl; he had struck a nerve. "Yes, I

know that you were lying to me when you told me that you, too, followed the Ancients." The Councilor roared and charged at him, Garek quickly clipping the rifle to his thigh and activating the energy daggers on his wrists.

Ralo swung, Garek simply stepping to the side; he could already tell that the Councilor was out of practice, but that didn't mean he should lower his guard. Ralo recovered and swung again, aiming directly for Garek's head. Garek crossed his daggers and parried the blow, kicking Ralo in the side multiple times before hopping away. Ralo growled and charged again, and this time Garek lowered his arms to his side and deactivating his blades. The Councilor grinned as he got closer, jumping forward when he was six feet away.

Garek sidestepped, grabbing Ralo's sword arm and twisting it, delivering a punch to the face simultaneously. The Councilor howled as the hilt fell to the ground, his arm broken. "Tell me, Ralo—if I were a coward, why did I fight back?" He let go, allowing the Councilor to fall down. "If I were a heretic—would I not have been discovered sooner?"

"Kill him!"

"Anto wouldn't kill me; he doesn't have the courage to face me, not after the numerous humiliations I put him through in the sparring ring," Garek said matter-of-factly, glaring at Anto all the while. "Isn't that right?"

Anto shook his head and ignited his sword. "I should have done this long ago. Your kind does not deserve to even exist!" With that, he charged. Garek returned the charge, outmatching Anto's speed. As they met, Garek carried out the same action he had used on Ralo. He picked Anto up by his armor, surprising himself at how light he felt.

"What do you mean 'my kind'?" he growled. "I am the same as you, a Sangheili! We should not be fighting each other, but fighting the Jiralhanae!"

"You fool, you do not even know what you are," Anto laughed. "I am going to enjoy watching your death."

Garek's temper suddenly flared, and he slammed Anto against a building. "All three of us can walk away from this, Anto. Nobody has to die."

"Listen to him, Ralo. Trying to beg for his life, even when he has bested us! Have you bested us, Garek? Have you really?"

"I am not begging for my life, I am trying to save yours. All you two have to do is swallow your pride and walk away."

"Listen to yourself! You're the most pathetic excuse for a Sangheili I have ever seen! A true warrior would have killed us both and walked away laughing by now!"

"So be it," Garek growled, grabbing Anto on either side of his head. The Sangheili screamed as he stuck his thumbs into his eye sockets, releasing him when they bled. Garek then formed a fist and placed it a few inches from Anto's throat. "Goodbye, Anto."

"I'll be waiting for you in Hell!" he spat between whimpers. Garek hesitated when he heard a feminine gasp to his left.

"I told you to keep going, Shara." She stood in silent horror, having seen Garek gouge Anto's eyes. He turned back to Anto and lowered his fist, "It looks like you will have to live the rest of your life in darkness, brother." He hauled Ralo up and shoved him, "Get out of here, and hope that I never see either of you in the future!" They complied and ran, Ralo having to guide the whimpering Anto down the street. Garek sighed, "I'm sorry that you had to see that" when he said those things, I couldn't control my rage."

"It's okay they were the ones who went into the clinic."

Garek eyed the fallen Type-50, hesitant to pick it up; the very thought of using it after Anto had tainted it by killing two innocent - and Gods only knew who else - officers with it. "I really have no other choice I will need another weapon if this rifle runs empty," he thought with a sigh.

"What do you plan to do once we are off this station?" she said while he checked himself over.

"We will try to find a capable Shipmaster, commandeer a ship, and fight these vermin back to their homeworld," he said, keeping that matter-of-fact tone. "Have you ever fired a weapon before?"

"No. My brother wanted to teach me, for self-defense, but"

Garek nodded and grabbed a Plasma Rifle from the other dead officer. "Here, take this. This glyph will prime the weapon's core, and this one triggers the safety. This bar on the side measures how hot the rifle is getting; when it begins to turn orange, release the trigger and let it cool down. Since you don't have any Combat Lenses, you will have to watch where your shots are going and correct when necessary. Try to hit that sign over there, fire in two-shot bursts," he said, pointing to a street sign. It took her a moment to figure out the weapon's balance before she brought the rifle up and fired, striking the sign with her first three bursts. "Not bad. Now come, we don't have much time."

Shara watched the Major as she ran behind him; he kept looking through every window and doorway, tilting his head and sniffing the air when gunfire sounded in the distance. He would look over his shoulder every so often, checking to see if she was still behind him she assumed. They came to a corner and he waved his hand at her, his palm facing the ground and fingers spread, moving it left to right. "What is it?" she whispered.

He looked to her and put a finger over the chin of his helmet, signaling her to stay quiet. He looked around the corner once more before turning back to her again. "Wait here. I'll only be a moment," he whispered, beginning to eye the building they were using as cover. He bent his legs and jumped with a grunt, grabbing onto a small ledge and starting to climb for the roof. She watched as he scaled the seemingly sheer face with such skill and grace; it was awe-inspiring that such a warrior existed, and he was personally escorting her to safety! She felt something rise in her subconscious, though she was unsure of what it was. Her musing was interrupted by two cracks of a Type-50 from above, the Major reappearing and climbing back down to

the street.

"The street ahead is clear, for now," he said in his naturally quiet, and somewhat hoarse, voice. There was a sudden howl, the frightening sound echoing through the empty streets. "And they won't be for much longer. How fast can you run?"

"I'm not slow, by any means," she said slowly. "Why do you ask?"

"Try to keep up," he said simply, taking off at full speed down the street. She set off after him, already aware that she wouldn't be able to keep his pace.

"Garek! Wait!" she called, he looking over his shoulder and immediately stopping.

"Come on, we are running out of time!" he called back as she approached. When she caught up, he spoke, "Ermâ€¦climb onto my back."

"What?"

"Just do it, arms loosely around my neck and do the same with your legs around my waist. I can keep the same pace, even with the extra weight." He crouched for her to climb on, and she hesitantly complied, not wanting to burden him anymore than she already had. "Keep an eye out to our rear, understand?"

"Yes." He nodded and took off again, and she found that he wasn't lying when he said that he could keep the same pace. They ran past several dead or gravely wounded security officers, marks from Jiralhanae weapons all over their bodies and the surrounding walls. She wanted to tell him to stop so she could see if anything could be done for them, but decided against it; there were more urgent matters at hand, and although she would never tell anyone, she was afraid of death. "Garekâ€¦"

"There is nothing we can do other than to keep moving and pray for them, Shara. Do you not smell the stench?" he said between breaths; he was beginning to slow and breathe heavily.

"How much further is it?"

"A few hundred metersâ€¦.why?"

"Let me off, I promise not to slow you down," she said, trying to be reassuring.

"No, it's too risky. I can smell them getting closer to us. How are we looking to the rear?"

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes widening at the sight of a Chieftain standing atop one of the buildings, watching them with his arms crossed. "Garekâ€¦could you possibly go a little faster?"

"I'm sure I could. Why, what's back there?"

"A Chieftainâ€¦."

"Shit. Tighten your grip," he said, lowering his posture slightly and practically hopping with each stride.

She could hear his comm link chime from within his helmet and a Sangheili with a smooth, yet strangely accented, voice speaking. _"Garek, be advised. A large number of Jiralhanae just passed by the hangar bay and are heading in your direction!"_

"Copy thatâ€|how many, Ar'n?"

"_I think I saw ten of the bastards, all Minors and one Captainâ€|no sign of their Chieftain, though."_

"Have you secured a vehicle?"

"_Yes, and Rypa found his way to us, so we also have a pilot."_

"Okay. See if you can thin them out for meâ€|I found a survivor, and I don't want to take chances."

"_Yes sir. Deza, keep your staff on that damn ship! Rotje and any others from the 349__th__, remain here and guard the door! Rangers, on me! We'll do the best we can, brotherâ€|"_

"That's all I ask of you, Ar'n. May the Gods watch over you." He suddenly slid to a halt and craned his neck to look at her, "This is where you get off, ma'am. Take cover in that shop over there and do _not _come out until I return. Okay?"

She nodded and jumped through the shattered window. She watched as he took a plasma grenade from his belt and keyed the glyph, activating it and making it burn a bright blue. He stood patiently in the middle of the street, waiting for the first of the Jiralhanae to round a corner before finally chucking it full-force and sticking one in the forehead. The youngling flailed in a panicked attempt to remove the explosive, only to fail and die along with two of his comrades in the blast. She blinked as the wave of heat hit her face, but continued to watch the event unfold.

Garek briefly glanced over his shoulder to make sure the female had stayed where he instructed, nodding to himself when he saw that she had. He cursed when he checked the charge on his Type-50 and noticing that it only had four shots left before it was empty. _"Anto must have missed more than twice," _he thought bitterly to himself. He brought the rifle up and fired into the nearest enemy's skull, doing the same with the next three. Only three of the Jiralhanae remained; two Minors and their Captain. He looked to his Type-25 and tossed it to the ground, knowing that it would do no good against the bastards.

"Are you surrendering, whelp?" the Captain called in a mocking tone.

Garek shook his head as he activated his energy daggers. "No, I am only getting started. I may walk away from this encounterâ€|but neither will any of you." The Captain barked an order at his troops, watching with a malicious grin as they dropped their weapons and charged Garek.

Garek stood his ground, sliding his right hoof back and entering a fighting stance. When the faster of the two neared, he closed the distance and threw up an arm to block its punch. He used his free hand to stab it in the side and slice it open, its guts and blood spilling to the street and on his armor. He used the dead Jiralhanae's momentum to bound over it as it fell, twisting his body to plant both hooves in the other's face. The other stumbled back, but quickly regained its footing. Garek deactivated his blades and set upon it with his fists, the two of them trading blows.

Eventually, a blow struck Garek in the side of the head and knocking him to the ground, his helmet bouncing on the pavement a few feet away. The Jiralhanae tried to pin him to the ground and pummel him, but Garek got both of his hooves on its chest and kicked him off, roaring at the weight of the bastard. It fell onto its back and Garek took the opportunity to mimic its action and pin it down. He was surprised as it struggled beneath him. He shook the feeling and proceeded to land blow after blow on its face until its struggling slowed. When it stopped completely, he grabbed both sides of its head and twisted it sharply to one side, the vertebrae responding with a wet _snap_. He slowly stood, blood still dripping from his hands and armor. His eyes rose only to see the Captain wearing that same grin, a Spiker in hand.

He paused and simply stared at the weapon as it fired, pain bursting in his gut as the seven inch spikes stuck into his abdomen. He gagged as blood entered his stomach, coughing up some of it as he reached for his remaining grenade. He primed and threw it as he doubled over, hearing the satisfying grunt and proceeding whine of the device charging to explode. He thought he heard a feminine cry from behind him as it detonated.

He barely felt a pair of hands tug on the back of his armor and begin to drag him toward where the Captain had once stood, the sounds of several Sangheili Rangers shouting the all-clear barely audible. As darkness crept its way into the edges of his vision, he plucked the spikes from his abdomen and let them fall from his hands. He allowed a small smile to form on his mandibles, feeling the pain subside and the bleeding stop as his body began to heal at its abnormal rate.

"Damn it," Ar'n muttered as he dragged Garek's still body onto the Phantom they had secured. "Deza, do you have any medical supplies?"

"Yes. Clear some space, please," she said, shoving several of the Rangers out of her way. She knelt next to Garek and immediately frowned. "There is no need, Ar'nâ€¦look." She gestured to the holes in the bodysuit, the skin underneath already closed and healed. She looked to the Minor's left and saw a female staring at the body sadly. "You there," she said, gesturing to the female.

"Yes?" she said, not looking away from the body.

"You wear the robes of a doctor, but you are not part of my remaining staff. What is your name?"

She finally looked to Deza and bowed her head, "Shara 'Hesum is my name, ma'am. I worked in District 4's clinic."

"So, that's what he went after," she muttered as she stood. "Well met, Shara 'Hesum. I am Deza 'Telam, former Chief Medical Officer aboard the _Seeker of Truth, Fleet of Retribution_. You are welcome to join my staff; I lost several of them on the way to that hangar bay."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Garek suddenly groaned, "Gods, damn it all. Never again." He held his abdomen as he sat up with a grunt, eyeing the Rangers that still stood around him. "You all look as if you have seen a ghost!"

"If you want to be technical about it, your vitals flatlined, sir," Z'aes said, extending a hand down.

Garek readily accepted it, eyeing the remaining six Rangers as he stood. "This is all of you?"

"I'm afraid so, Garek," Ar'n began. "We only lost two to the Jiralhanae, while some others went off to make trouble. I couldn't reason with them!"

"That's fine. If they have already died, I am sure they did so with honor. If not, I'm certain they are giving the Jiralhanae eight different kinds of hell." A few of the Rangers banged fists on their chestplates and barked in approval.

Garek saw Shara standing with her back to him and he decided to approach. "Ma'am! you have made it all right, yeah?" he said quietly, placing a hand on her shoulder. She turned sharply and threw her arms around him, he freezing at the display. He looked around the troop bay briefly, seeing those that were staring quickly turn away or act busy out of respect. "Shhh," he soothed as she wept. "You are safe now."

"Thank you," she whispered, obviously not caring that he was still covered in Jiralhanae, and his own, blood. "Any other male would have left me back there or called insults before attacking me!"

"Fortunately, that was not the case, hmm?"

"Aye! So, how do you plan on finding a Shipmaster in midst of all this chaos?" she said in a serious tone.

"That, I'm afraid, may be the most difficult part of my little plan," he sighed, turning toward the cockpit. "Rypa, have you made contact with any Sangheili since we left?"

"Just one, Garek! A Spec Ops Commander by the name of Rtas 'Vadumee!"

Garek walked into the cockpit and looked down at Rypa, "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Would you like to speak with him?"

"Please." Rypa keyed a few glyphs at his console and nodded when the connection was made.

"_Who is speaking?"_

"This is Major Domo Garek 'Izak with the 482nd Ranger Division, your Excellency. My current commander isn't in touch and I was wondering if you could use a hand."

"_I could use all the help I can get, Major. How many of you are there?"_

"Six other Rangers, eight soldiers from the 349th Division, a handful of doctors, and a pilot," he listed.

"_Excellent. Are the troops combat ready?"_

"Absolutely. A couple of them are in rough shape, and we're low on ammunition, but we can still put up a fight."

"_I'm glad to hear that, Major. The Jiralhanae have taken over one of our carriers, and I intend to take it back. I'm sending your pilot the appropriate coordinates, meet me there."_

"Received, your Excellencyâ€|Be advised, it will be a couple of hours before we arrive," Rypa said.

"_Understood, pilot. I am very patient, Majorâ€|but the Jiralhanae are not. Get here as fast as you can."_

"Understood, your Excellency. Out," Garek keyed the glyph to terminate the link and returned his attention to Rypa, "Have you ever been in combat?"

"I have been trained to fight, but no, I have not. I will try to not let you down, brother. I see that you didn't use your suffixâ€|"

"I have stripped my name of it, Rypa. It's obvious that the Prophets don't want us around, so why keep something that would remind me of such backstabbers?" he said bitterly, leaving the pilot alone afterward. "Listen up! In a couple of hours, we will be making contact with a Spec Ops Commander."

"And do what?" Rotje said as he examined one of the purple crystals from his Type-31.

"We are going to help him take back one of our ships."

"I'm not working with the fucking Spec Ops," one of the Minors spat.

"You can and will, Minor. See them not as Spec Ops, but as fellow Sangheili; your brothers. That is all we have left nowâ€|our fellow Sangheili," Garek said. "The Prophets have turned their backs on us! And we will show them the grave mistake they have made in doing so!"

"What about the Journey?" another asked. "Does this mean we will not be allowed to walk the Path?"

"The Journey is a lie, a fabrication created by the Prophets to make us blindly follow them."

"Soâ€|all of the past hereticsâ€|"

"Were right, brother," he finished. "They learned the truth, and they paid dearly for itâ€|but those days are at an end!"

"We cannot fight the Covenant. Not alone," Z'aes pointed out. "Even with an entire Sangheili armada, they would outmatch us."

"Right you are, Z'aes. We need to form an alliance with someoneâ€|Tell me, brothers: who else despises the Covenant?"

"No. _Hell _no," Ar'n said. "I would rather work with Unggoy than humans."

"We may not have another choice."

"Of course we do! We do not need those vermin to defeat the Prophets, we can do it ourselves!"

Garek huffed and waved his hand at them, giving up trying to reason with them. "Perhaps the Commander will be more willing to side with them," he muttered as he sat next to Rotje, who was still looking at that same crystal.

"Even if he agrees to your suggestion, what makes you think the humans will be so willing?" Rotje said, finally placing the crystal back in its bandolier.

Garek sighed, "I don't know, a common enemy?"

"And then what? They don't like us any more than we like them; they have certainly earned that right."

"You would be surprised what a common goal can do to unite two or more groups, brother. The Covenant was partly built on that ideal, was it not?"

Rotje scoffed, "And look how that turned outâ€|"

11. Chapter X: Conflict of Interest

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**ibLocation: Delta Halo, Covenant Separatist-held Zone, Spec Ops encampment/i **

**ibDate: November 5, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)/i**

**ibLocal Time: Unknown, Day Cycle /i**

Special Operations Commander Rtas 'Vadum - formerly of the i_Fleet of Particular Justice/i_ - stood in the center of the Separatist encampment, a crooked frown on his remaining mandibles as two subordinates stood by either side. "Commander, I thought that you said reinforcements would be arriving soon?" Ihro 'Sanov, his new Sub-Commander, said warily.

Rtas sighed; Ihro had always worried too much, and it sickened him to

think that he had replaced Baro 'Kusovai. "I i_did/i _say that, Ihro. Tell me Joka, how long has it been since I asked you both to join me out here?"

"A mere five minutes, Commander," Joka 'Ruwan, an Ultra that Rtas had i_wanted/i _to make his Sub-Commander, answered without hesitation; if Rtas simply felt nauseous for having Ihro around, Joka would have fought to keep his breakfast stomached. "I have a moreâ€|apt question."

"Then by all means, Joka, voice it."

"What skills will these warriors have, if you know at all?"

"That is the trouble, Joka; I have no idea what these warriors will be capable of. The Major Domo I spoke with told me that there were seven Rangers, eight warriors from the 349th, a few doctors, and a single pilot."

"Is that all? We will need more than that if we plan to take an i_Assault Carrier/i_, Commander," Ihro said.

Rtas glared at the smaller Sangheili; Ihro was at least six inches shorter and nowhere near as strong as he was. "Are you questioning my ability to lead, i_Sub/i_-Commander?"

"N-no, I was simply saying that we do not have," he was cut off by Joka backhanding him.

"You are a disgrace, Ihro. The only reason the Commander gave you this position is because he knew I would have turned it down," Joka grunted as Ihro held a shocked hand to his already-bruising face. "To think that you would even i_doubt/i _the Commander, or the brothers soon arriving for that matter, not being able to handle the taking of a ship makes me want to vomit!" His fists clenched tightly and his silver eyes narrowed as he continued to glare at Ihro.

Rtas placed a hand on his shoulder, "Be at ease, Joka. He is merely concerned that we will not be able to pull this offâ€|and he may be right.

Look around you. Everyone here is hungry, demoralized, and a few are injured." He shook his head, "Even with these new arrivals, there will only be thirty warriors on the offensive, and that is including those that can no longer fight."

"Only time will tell, Commander. We will have to see what the Gods have seen fit to bless us with," Joka said, nodding.

"Indeed. My only fear is that we may have to stoop to the Jiralhanae's level."

"You meanâ€|fighting dirty?" Ihro said lowly.

"There may be no honor in itâ€|but, what honor is there to be had in laying waste to mongrels?" The drone of a Phantom's engines became audible long before the craft became visible. Rtas signaled to the Shade Turret operator hidden in the tree line as it slowed and lowered, stopping just above the ground. The sound of various weapons being raised echoed throughout the camp as the engines quieted and

the doors lowered.

"All of you wait here," Garek said, eyeing the number of weapons trained on the dark troop bay. He made for the starboard-side ramp, but stopped as a Sangheili in bone-white Combat Armor held up a hand.

"Halt! I wish to speak with the Major from before," he called.

"It is I, your Excellency. Would you be kind enough to order your warriors to lower their rifles? It is rather unsettling to see my brothers so willing to gun me down," Garek called back. The Commander waved his other hand while signaling for him to step off the Phantom.

Rtas raised a brow as he watched the scrawny Major approach; he was covered in Jiralhanae blood and the holes in his bodysuit were unmistakable, though he still walked with strength and certainty. "I seeâ€|that you are dressed for the occasion, Major."

Garek tilted his head before looking at himself. "Ohâ€|right. Apologies for myâ€|unacceptable appearance, Commander," he said with his head bowed.

Joka chortled. "Unacceptable? The sight of Jiralhanae blood is welcome here, Major; it raises the spirits of your brothers to see such brutality against those conniving bastards."

"I appreciate you thinking so, sir, but i_I/i _find it unacceptableâ€|I reek and I cannot stand it."

"Joka, show our new arrival to the nearby creek so he can wash away the filth and we can be properly introduced," Rtas ordered as the others disembarked from the Phantom. He eyed the shortest male he had ever seen step off, arrogance seeming to pour off of this Minor in droves. "Excuse meâ€|"

"Piss off," the Minor growled, his eyes going wide immediately and his face flushing at what most would consider a fatal error. "My apologies, your Excellency! I have a lot on my mind, and-"

"Relax, Minor. I simply wished to ask what you specialize in," Rtas cut him off, chuckling.

"Oh, ermâ€|I specialize in Tech and Reconnaissance, your Excellency." Ar'n paused to shift uncomfortably, still shocked at his own blind vulgarity; he knew he was vulgar, and that he always had been, but he was_ inot/i _blind. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to know what I have to work with," Rtas shrugged. "What do you mean by 'Tech', Minorâ€|?"

"Oh, Ar'n 'Drakos is my name. Technological Infiltration, your Excellency; it is usually my task to hack into an enemy network and disable any number of things. Unlocking doors, jamming communications, changing the targeting parameters on automated turrets, just to name a few."

"That is a skillset more appropriate for a Spec Ops warrior. What are you doing in a Ranger unit?"

"If I earned money for every time I have been asked that question," Ar'n muttered. "Because I volunteered for it, your Excellency. I do not believe in hiding from my enemies in battle, or even to do simple recon tasks. No, my place is on the frontlines, killing and dying at my brothers' sidesâ€|thus is the grim reality of being a Minor."

Rtas nodded slowly. "I would rather have a Minor who knows not only what, but i_who/i_, he is and what is at stake instead of blindly following orders. You and I will get along just fine, Ar'n 'Drakos."

"We shall see, your Excellency." When Rtas raised a curious brow, he shrugged, "You just have to know me."

Er, may I take my leave? I want to ensure that I have enough supplies before we take off again."

"Of course. My ever-silent Sub-Commander, Ihro 'Sanov, will show you to our stockpile." He nodded to Ihro and began asking each new member what they specialized in. A Shipmaster needed to know his crew, after all.

Garek eyed the creek warily once they arrived, absolutely hating the wide-open surroundings. There were hills on either side, no trees or rocks for cover, and the angle in which the creek sank was shallow; a metaphorical gold mine for a sniper. "Have you sent out any scouts, sir?"

"No Major, we have not. Sending out even one warrior would put the rest of the camp at risk of being discovered."

"Hmm. Has anyone gone missing?"

"No," Joka said slowly, frowning as he realized something. "If you would prefer warm water, there are some hot springs a few meters downstream. It's more secluded than this area. I must return to the camp and take a headcount, Major. Do not take too long," he said quickly as he walked away, his worry evident.

Garek sniffed the air briefly, sighing when all he could smell was the blood on his armor. He moved downstream, pausing every few feet and looking around to make sure he wasn't being watched or followed. Steam became visible before the springs did, and he smiled to himself when he found them. "Secluded, indeed," he murmured as he stepped in the warm cavern. He knelt before one of the pools and stuck his hands into the hot water, sighing as it took the soreness away. As he pulled a clean rag out of his pack, the sound of shifting dirt and a stifled growl made him reach for the rifle clipped to his right thigh.

"Be at ease, brother. I was sent to keep an eye on you," a disembodied voice whispered.

He relaxed somewhat, though he still kept a hand resting on his right leg. "I would prefer it if I had i_some/i _privacy. Would it not be better for you to watch over the entrance instead of watching me bathe?" He glanced around the small, dark space in search of the cloaked warrior, just catching a shadow as he stepped into the

entrance and left Garek alone. He listened for a few minutes and when he didn't hear the warrior return, he stripped himself down and placed the armor and his bodysuit into the pool nearest to the one he was going to bathe in.

He washed quickly and began to wipe his armor clean with some difficult bit. "I wonder if I packed any of that cleaning solution," he muttered as a few splotches of congealed blood remained on his chest plates. He dug into his pack for a moment, setting aside various survival items before finding a small jar of blue-green liquid and another cylindrical container of armor polish. "Matter finish?" he mused, shrugging. What the cleaner contained, he wasn't sure, but it immediately liquefied the blood as he applied it. He went back to his pack, cursing quietly when he didn't find a patch kit for his bodysuit. "Perhaps Ar'n has a spare," he thought as he applied the final piece of armor and replaced his Combat Lenses.

"Ah! You have finished cleaning yourself, brother. Let us return to camp so the Commander can gather options for taking that carrier," the Spec Ops warrior said as he uncloaked. His armor was made up of Combat Armor of varying ages, or "Types", and was colored entirely black, save for the "wings" — the stripes running along either side of the helmet — which were colored a dark violet.

"You're an Azr'sju?" Garek said in disbelief, just catching a distinct marking on the warrior's eyelid when he blinked.

"No, I was one. Recent events persuaded me to choose the proper side to fight for. I am but a simple warrior now, and a damn good one. Special Operations Minor Domo Razo 'Nezomee' | pardon, 'Nezom."

"Wait — I remember you — Yes, you were the rude little shit when we dropped together on Reach," he said, distrust and confusion in his voice. "But, you were reported as —"

"Dead, I know. Since you knew what I used to be, is it safe to assume that you are also aware of how we operated?"

"Somewhat. I know that you all take on aliases when working with the other races — or anyone, for that matter. So, that begs the question: who are you, really?"

"Sadly, not even I remember my true name. Only the Gods — the true Gods know that now. That assignment was the last one I took part in, as it takes time for one of my kind to get an assignment. We were well-known and valuable, to a select few, but those few didn't like to use us. 'They do not kill with honor,' the Supreme Commander would say — well, look what happened to him, eh?"

"What did you mean by 'just a warrior'?"

"The Order is dead, that's what I mean. I simply decided to do the smart thing and leave it before I followed suit."

"That or you don't want to be held responsible for things the Order has done in the past," Garek murmured.

"Hmph, you know more than you let on, but no matter. It's true, some

of our actions may have tipped the scales, so to speak. We just hadn't expected things to turn out the way they didâ€¦damned San'Shyuum. Not only are they backstabbing and power-hungry, they are more unpredictable than a Sangheili's thunderstorm during the summer months."

"Heh, indeed." They remained silent the rest of the journey back to camp, Garek staying behind the former i_Azr'sju/i _out of distrust and he could tell that Razo knew it. "Thank you for the escort, brother."

"No need to thank me. We look after our own, unlike some others."

Garek nodded before he turned toward what he guessed was the stockpile of supplies, hearing curses coming from the side opposite him. "Having trouble, Ar'n?" he said lightly, his friend peeking around a supply crate.

"This is bullshit, Garek. These Spec Ops don't even have any Type-51 Carbines!"

"We make do with what we are given, whelp. Just like anybody else. Ah, Major 'Izak! You have returned at lastâ€¦why does your armor look so dull?" Joka said as he checked various recharge packs, replacement rifle cores, and Type-31 bandoliers.

"Oh, ermâ€¦all I had was a matte finish, sir. I believe it will benefit me once we attack the carrier."

"How so? White tends to stand out, Major, dull or not."

"Well, it doesn't reflect as much light; in a well-shadowed area, I would be rather hard to spot."

"You're welcome," Ar'n said before sighing in resignation. "Do you not have any other Type-31 rifles available, sir?"

"I'm afraid not, Minor. All of those were taken by my fellow Special Operations warriors."

"Do you have i_any ___/i_projectile weaponsâ€¦something with precision in mind, perhaps?"

At that, Joka looked up and smiled. "Follow me. I was hoping to find someone willing to use theseâ€¦" Garek shrugged when Ar'n looked to him as they followed the Spec Ops Ultra to a tent. "We captured these from a large Jiralhanae patrol during the Night Cycle. Have a look," he said, gesturing to a metal case painted in a dull green.

Garek still had trouble reading the humans' language, but Ar'n clarified when he read, "U.N.S.C. Tactical Supply Dropâ€¦.oh, how difficult they make it for their troops to know what it is, eh? Contents: M392A1 Designated Marksman Rifles, Count: Ten. You cannot be seriousâ€¦"

"You asked for projectile weapons, I gave you projectile weapons. Choose your words more carefully next time, Minor."

"Next timeâ€¦?"

"I am assigning this rifle to youâ€¦for the time being, of course. And, you being the size you are, the stock should reach your shoulder without having to be modified. Speaking of weapon assignmentâ€¦Major, what do you specialize in?"

"I'm a sharpshooter, sir. I am also quite capable of handling myself in close quarters, as I'm sure you noticed."

"Hmm. Which would you prefer: a Type-50 SRS or a Type-52 SAR?"

"The Type-50, a spare core, and a few recharge packsâ€¦if you can spare them, of course."

Joka laughed. "Spare them? There is only one other sniper here, Major, and that would be me. There," he gestured to a rack holding a single rifle, "take Azria. She may be old, but her bite is much stronger than these modern Type-50's."

"Youâ€¦i_named/i_ your rifle?" Ar'n said as he fiddled with the scope on the DMR he had chosen. "Garek, you have definitely gotten us in with a strange bunchâ€¦"

"Says the short Minor Domo," Joka said lightly. "Most warriors of my family's past named their swords, so I figured 'Why not?'. Whether it's a sword or not should not matter, in my opinion." Garek walked up to the mantle and looked to Joka questioningly. "Go on, take it. Perhaps you will put it to better use than I ever did."

He took the weapon from its place and looked through the scope, finding that it was much more powerful than a standard variable zoom. "Did you balance this yourself, sir?"

"Absolutely. I enhanced the scope, as I'm sure you noticed; improved the firing coils and cooling packs, as well. The core can fire triple the amount than standard and it won't overheat as quickly. Technically speaking, it's a different weapon."

"Thirty shots," Garek mused quietly. "What about range?"

"It will reach just over two miles before the shot dissipates. There are two drawbacks, though. There is more recoil, and it makes much more noise due to the more powerful core and firing coils. Oh, and you definitely do _not_ want to overheat it," he finished, holding his palms out.

"Ugh, that bad?" Ar'n said as he continued looking over his rifle, checking and memorizing each mechanism with a sigh. "This thing has noâ€¦what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Personality?" Joka suggested.

"Yes, personality."

"Well, if the humans are good at anything, it's making ugly, yet efficient killing machines. Just look at their tanks; monstrous, loud, and slower than an Unggoy miner, but their guns can put a shell directly through the cockpit of a Wraith. They may be an idiotic, sacrilegious bunch, but I believe fighting them was much more satisfying. At least the humans have tact and witâ€¦makes for a much

more worthy foe," Joka sighed. "Listen to me ramble. Major, assemble your Rangers while the standard infantry that arrived fall into a mixed unit with the others."

They shared a salute before the Ultra left. "Makes sense, I suppose," Ar'n said. "The Jiralhanae seem soâ€¦uncreative when they fight; it's just go in and brutally murder whatever stands in the way. The humans do the same thing, but at least add a process to it."

Garek nodded. "I agree with what he said. Those two things are going to be what make them such powerful allies."

"Are you saying that we don't have tact and wit?"

"No. I'm sure we could handle ourselves, but imagine us, the Sangheili and the humans, coming together and fighting off the Covenant i_and/i _the Parasite."

"What happens after that?"

"After what?"

"When the war is over and there is no more 'common enemy'â€¦then what?"

"I don't know, Ar'n; only time will tell, and I, for one, don't have time for 'what ifs'. Now, would you gather our fellows?"

"I'm still trying to figure this damn thing outâ€¦"

"Please? Don't make it an order, Ar'nâ€¦"

Ar'n sighed and clipped the rifle to his back. "Well, alright. But only because you said please," he said lightly. "We're going to do the chants, aren't we?"

"Yes." Ar'n nodded and finally left, leaving him free to think for a few minutes. _"How am I going to convince the Commander that making some kind ofâ€¦pact with the humans is absolutely necessary? What ifâ€¦" _He sighed as he stopped the thought immediately. "So, I'm a hypocrite?" he said to himself before shrugging and exiting the tent. He found the Commander standing exactly where he had been when they arrived, Z'aes speaking to him quietly as they looked at a small holographic map of a standard Covenant Assault Carrier.

"This is going to be a painstakingly slow process, your Excellency. Unless we can somehow turn the Unggoy, Kig-Yar, and possibly any Sangheili still loyal to the Prophets - Gods forbid - to our favor, I say this assault will take roughlyâ€¦six hours, perhaps longer," Z'aes said, the Commander nodding as he listened.

"Your input is greatly appreciated, Minor 'Xaser. I will see to it that you are promoted once we take the Carrierâ€¦but you overlooked something. See there?" he pointed to a spot above the very center of the ship, where the Command Deck was housed. The picture enlarged to reveal several tunnels running around the ship. "One of those maintenance tunnels should lead directly to the Command Deck."

"Yes, but if you had an infiltration in mind, how would we get into those tunnels?"

"Simple, 'Xaser. Your squad is going to cut their way into the ship from the outside. Do you see this particular tunnel, here?" He highlighted it with a claw. "That should be the easiest way in."

"Others will be performing similar tasks around the ship, I take it?" Garek said, announcing his presence.

"Indeed, Major. I will separate my warriors and members of the 349th into five-man kill teams, while you separate the Rangers into two-man infiltration teams. Your warriors will be finding flanks for the kill teams, providing assistance from behind, or taking key points throughout the ship." The Commander paused to look at the display again, and then looked Garek in the eyes. "Are you familiar with guerilla warfare, Major?"

"I am. However, we cannot keep the element of surprise for very longâ€|unless you had something in mind, your Excellency?"

"Please Major, you may just call me 'sir' or 'Commander'. The best we can do with the number of warriors and supplies we have would be resorting to Hit & Run tactics, I'm afraid; a cowardly way to fight, but effective."

"No disrespect, Commander, but so is using active camouflage," Ar'n said suddenly, standing at attention when Garek glared at him. "I have assembled the warriors as requested, sir."

"Thank you, Ar'n. Go stand with them and wait to be addressed, you as well Z'aes." They both saluted and walked off. "Sorry about that. Ar'n certainly isn't afraid to speak his mind."

"No harm done. What are your feelings on this plan, Majorâ€|?"

"Garek 'Izak, sir. If it's the best we can do, I say it's worth the effort to try," he shrugged. "I will need a new helmet, though."

"I had a feeling that I would need it," Rtas mumbled. "You're in luck, Major. Weâ€|found the body of a Ranger a few days ago and were able to salvage some of the armor. A damn Chieftan must have found the poor soul because there was almost nothing left. Please, wait here for a moment and I will get it for you." Garek tilted his head slightly as the Commander walked into a tent, thinking it strange that a Spec Ops Commander would get something for him, instead of just showing or telling him where to find it. Rtas returned shortly, fiddling with the helmet as he walked over. "I know it isn't the right Type, but it will seal just the same," he said, the helmet turning from cobalt to off-white with red markings, it now matching his armor. Unlike the Type his Ranger group was assigned, this helmet didn't have a full-face visor; in place of the visor was armor plating and two eye lenses.

Garek slid the helmet onto his head and locked the seals, disappointed to find that some of his peripheral vision was blocked by the helmet's design. "It will have to do. Thank you, sir. If you have a plan formed, I would like to address the Rangers I brought with me before you share it with everyone." Rtas nodded and waved for him to walk over to the assembly, watching with interest as every

Ranger saluted. The Major shifted uncomfortably for a moment before calling out, "Rangers! My brothers!"

"i_Arut a'Kesjaz,/i_" they chanted in unison, banging their fists once upon their chests.

"Not twenty-four hours ago, we were done a great injustice! The so-called "Holy Prophets" and their miserable lapdogs, the Jiralhanae, openly killed our brothers and sisters upon High Charity and only the Gods know where else! This is not war they have waged, but murder! Genocide! And we must i_not/i _stand idly by while they do so! You there, what is your name?"

A Minor took a single step forward and rapped on his left shoulder with his right hand, "Raja 'Susep, sir!"

"Did you have any family on High Charity, brother?"

"Aye, my mother and infant sister. A Chieftan barged into their apartment and killed them both with a Gravity Hammer before I arrived, but they did not go down without a fight! My mother had nearly clawed the skin from his face and fully blinded him before he even struck her."

"May their souls find the i_true/i _path, brother. Now is not the time to give in, to falter! If we show weakness, then we i_are/i _weak in their eyes! We will show them the true might of our people, as we have done in the past! Today, my brothers, we will show no mercy, no remorse, and most importantly, we must show that we do i_not/i _need the lesser species to win our battles for us!"

"i_Ah-roo! Ce ka'norah sjezep!/i_" They banged their fists against their armor with each word of the chant before bowing their heads and saluting once again.

The Major returned the gesture, "At ease. If you have not resupplied, I suggest you do so now as Commander 'Vadum would like to go over his plan of attack." The group dispersed as Garek moved back over to Rtas, the latter nodding.

"A fine speech, Major; you're a Field Marshall in the making. But those chantsâ€¦I have never heard them before."

"Oh, that? It's a regimental thing. The two chants they gave were first: 'Now and Forever', and second: 'We will not fail'. I'm glad you thought so, but I i_hate/i _speaking publicly, even if it is to my fellows. I have one question." Rtas motioned for him to ask, "When will the assault begin?"

"Ah. We will leave when it reaches the Night Cycle once more, so our Phantoms would be harder to spot from the ground or from orbit. After I give out orders, I suggest you tell your warriors to double- and triple-check i_all/i _of their equipment before getting a few hours of sleep; I want everyone to be well-rested and combat-ready two hours after it gets dark. Is that understood, Major?"

"Absolutely, Commander. I will be informing my brothers if you need me for something," Garek said with a salute, leaving when it was returned. He found the Minor he had pulled from the line during his

speech, approaching as the subordinate seemed to be mulling over something. "Raja, was it?"

"Ayeâ€|"

"Thinking of your family, eh?"

Raja sighed sadly, "Yeah. Pardon my vulgarity, butâ€|it's all fucked. Why did the Prophets not just kill the immediate relatives of those damned Honor Guards instead of punishing our i_entire/i _race? My sister didn't even have teeth yet, not a one!"

Garek placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let that anger fuel you in the battles ahead, brotherâ€|but, try to keep a level head, hmm?" He patted the shoulder when Raja simply nodded. "Get some rest if you can, Raja, Commander's order."

"Yes sir. I have already taken stock of my equipment; I'll be ready to go when the time comes." Garek went about checking on the others before finding a bunk, removing his armor, and falling in it.

iHe lowered his arms away from his face, feeling the heat surrounding him but not the pain. The flame was indeed all around, forming a fiery bubble with only him and the creature within. He blurted the first thing that came into mind, "What?"/i

iThe bright-red avian cackled quietly and opened its golden eyes. "The time has come for you to learn some things, my son," it said, the voice unmistakable./i

i"Zuda?"/i

i"Aye, it is me. I will get straight to the point, as I am certain you absolutely despise these visions. The time is coming for someone to rise up and lead our people in the right directionâ€|someone that will succeed this time around. Do you know why we look so alike?"/i

i"Coincidence?" he shrugged./i

i"Oh, please. Neither of us believes in such a thing. No, we are alike becauseâ€|"/i

i"I am a direct descendant to you?"/i

i"Very close, my son."/i

iHe sighed. "I thought you were going to be directâ€|"/i

i"My apologies, I have the tendency to do that. Aye, my blood flows through your veins, Garek 'Izak."/i

i"What is going on out there? Are the Jiralhanae attacking Sangheilios? Andâ€|what is with this armor? I am not with the Spec Ops."/i

_i"All I can tell is that it is/i _noti _the Jiralhanae. The rest will be revealed in due time, my son...all in due time. I will no longer burden you with thisâ€|foreshadowing. You will know what to do when the time comes, you will feel it in your very soul."/i_

Garek grabbed someone's throat when they shook him awake, immediately letting go when he saw that it was Ar'n. "And I thought I could be paranoid at times," he murmured. "Come on, the Commander is waiting for us to gather."

Garek quickly replaced his armor and headed outside, helmet tucked under an arm. "Did you rest at all?"

"No, but I was able to get us a plasma cutter off of a Phantom dropping some supplies. I don't know who this Commander is, but he has connections if he's getting supplies at a time and in a place like this," Ar'n said lowly.

"Excellent, and it wouldn't surprise me. Most ascetics have connections with someone, somewhere. Not that it matters; he asked for something we would need, and his connection sent it, simple as that. Just be grateful and try not to ponder on it for too long, hmm?"

Ar'n nodded as they got into formation and stood at attention. "My brothers! Above us is a ship that the filthy Jiralhanae have taken from us! They murdered the Shipmaster and are using the other Sangheili they haven't killed or eaten for their entertainment! They think that victory is assured, simply because our backs are against the wall! Let us show them just how wrong they are! Groups have already been assigned and you will receive your orders en route, now load up!"

"i_Ah-roo/i_," they shouted collectively before quickly dispersing and stepping onto Phantoms.

Garek took note that the medical staff were watching from their tent and approached Rtas once they were in the air. "Who is watching over the doctors, sir?"

"A couple of my most trustedâ€¦colleagues. I believe you met one of them already," he said, blinking slowly to reveal the same mark that Razo had on his left eyelid. "Keep it to yourself, please? I fear that there are a few of my troops whose loyalty isâ€¦well, questionable."

"You don't think they would side with the San 'Shyuum, surely not during times like these?"

"I certainly hope not. It would be their final mistake, one that would greatly hinder our progress on the ship."

"Indeed. So, how do you plan on getting us onto the ship's exterior without getting vaporized by the defenses?"

"Simple, you will use stealth technology. I had Joka take a few liberties with your armor while all of you rested. Not the best of ways to keep ones trust, I know, but it was necessary. And Major, I can tell you're having trouble with that helmet. All you need to do is integrate it without your original armor's systems, and you will be able to see just as much, if not more, then you could with your last helmet."

Garek nodded and keyed the appropriate commands on his wrist

computer. He briefly lost his HUD and shields, the world turning a blurry, sickly shade of green as the system rebooted to accept the changes. He blinked when a soft chime sounded from his helmet speakers, the troop bay now becoming clearly visible. "Are thereâ€¦light filters in this helmet?"

"Ah, yes, I nearly forgot about those. As that helmet was specifically designed for use in the vacuum, it has sensors that take in light from nearby stars to make your vision clearer."

"Hmm. Then, why did my brothers not receive the same equipment?"

"They did. All it took were simple modifications; I did say that Joka took a few liberties, after all. Moving on, the build specs for this ship indicate that there are maintenance paths â€"ditches, the workers usually call them â€" that run all along the surface, out of sight of any turrets. A major design flaw, really," Rtas said, smirking as best he could. "Being coupled with the extraordinary tech expert you have, infiltration should be quite simple."

"The plan always sounds simple," Ar'n scoffed. "Completing the task is an entirely different story, sir."

"You doubt your own abilities, Minor?"

"Absolutely not, I am simply saying that talking about it and doing it are different."

"Indeed. I am putting not only my faith, but my trust in you, Rangers. Do i_not/i _fail me."

"i_Ce ka'norah sjezep/i_," they chanted, Rtas giving a single nod before entering the cockpit; he was the only warrior, apart from the pilot, that wasn't a Ranger.

i"I suggest you seal your suits now, if you haven't already. Once those doors lower, there is no turning back."/i

Garek looked to each of his fellows, getting confirmation from all. "We're ready to deploy. Just point us in the right direction. Ar'n, I hope you know that that rifle won't work out there."

"Which is why I brought this," he said, patting the Type-25 Plasma rifle on his right thigh. "What, did you think that i_I/i _would come unprepared? I'm offended."

Garek shook his head as he turned to Z'aes. "I suggest we try to free prisoners, if we find any."

"Indeed. If they were having thoughts of remaining loyal to the Prophets, surely being imprisoned and tortured changed their minds. Raja, we will be infiltrating closest to the holding cells, let's start there."

"Sounds good. And, if we do come across any Loyalists?"

"Try to reason first. If they resist stillâ€¦you will have no choice," Garek said.

"If worse comes to worse," Raja nodded as the cyan light winked on above their heads. "Well, this is our stop. Good luck, brothers, and if we don't see you once the ship is takenâ€|"

"See you on the other side," Garek and Ar'n said simultaneously. They all felt their suits warm and took hold of various handles as the atmosphere was released from the troop bay. Z'aes checked Raja's thruster pack while Garek did the same with the former's. i_"You're all set,"/_i Ar'n said with a pat to Garek's shoulder, the latter doing the same to Z'aes. The doors lowered to reveal the void beyond, Garek giving the two a push as the light changed to the usual shade of violet.

"Alright, Ar'n, remember that we only have enough thrust to control our landing onto the surface."

i_"No room for error, I know. I would say that I'm not ready, but this is what we have been trained to do."/_i

"We're both a bit nervous, then." He steeled himself as the Phantom slowed to a halt, closing his mind to the possible outcome of failure. The doors opened up to the void once more, the stars sitting against the impossible darkness. He placed a hand on Ar'n's back, the shorter Sangheili nodding for the push.

The feeling was incredible, yet horrifying, just floating along with no force to move them other than the momentum they had from leaving the dropship. Garek carefully brought up his wrist computer and activated his pack, Ar'n doing the same in front of himâ€|or was it below? It was hard to tell out here. "Go easy on the throttle, don't want to slam yourself into the side or completely overshoot it."

_i"I know, damn it! No more advice, just let me concentrate,"/i _Ar'n snapped. i_"Alright, moving for the target now. Are you following?"/i_

"I'm right behind you, brother. It looks like the turrets are inactiveâ€|"

i"I saw that. Perhaps this ship is dead in the water, hmm?"/i

"Heh, it's a possibility. It would certainly work to our advantage, no lights or security measures to stand in our way aside from the required systems." They floated toward the ship for what felt like an eternity, but landed much sooner than they expected. "Well, that's over with. Now, to just find the spot to cut our way inâ€|"

They began to move along the surface, using various handholds or notches in the hull to propel themselves forward. i_"I never want to do this again. It's insane,"/i_ Ar'n grumbled. Garek decided not to respond, agreeing silently. i_"I cannot believe I volunteered for this shit."/i_

"Stop whining and concentrate, Ar'n. We will be safely inside in no time at all. Look, just twelve meters ahead, to your right."

_i"Excellent."/i _They moved for the panel, which had served as a

maintenance hatch during the ship's construction and had long since been sealed. i_"The trick is finding the weak spot before starting to cut your way in."/i_

"And how would you know that?"

_i"There you go again, doubting my knowledge. Must be a 'superior officer' thing,"/i _he said lightly, taking a cord and tethering himself to the ship. i_"There is a tool for this, but sadly I have to do it by hand."/i _He began tapping various spots on the panel with his knuckles, pausing to feel if the vibration carried or not. i_"Ah! Found it. Are you ready?"/i _Garek tethered himself and pulled out the small wand; all of the cutter's energy was stored in the handle and didn't require any actual fuel to do its job. They both twisted the handles and the tips glowed white-hot. The metal began to glow dully as they dragged the tools across the surface, i_"Come on, come onâ€|yes! Sweet atmosphere!"/i _Ar'n pushed the panel inward and poked his head inside, scanning the tunnel. i_"It's clear, as expected."/i _

"Let's get inside, then." They dropped in one after the other and Garek pointed in the direction of the Command Deck. Moving along the dark, decrepit tunnel was slow and almost painstaking work. "That hatch, right there; it should get us inside the air ducts."

_i"Finally, I'll be able to hear something other than my own breathing and your voice. I cannot believe that these tunnels are connected; major design flaw, indeed,"/i _he said, typing commands on his wrist computer. The hatch slid open partially, stopping about one quarter of the way. i_"Well, we know that it hasn't been used since the ship was completed, and there's no telling when that was. We're going to have to force it."_ /i

Garek took out a plasma grenade and handed it to him. "I don't like using them, too messy," he said to Ar'n's tilted head.

_i"Simple isn't always bad, I suppose. Just give me a moment to set it for remote triggerâ€|got it."/i _He placed the charge on the interior of the next tunnel and moved away from the hatch. He keyed a glyph on his wrist and the explosive detonated, the light nearly blinding them. They moved through the hole and entered the air duct just before a shield wall activated and sealed the tunnel from the void. There was a quiet i_hiss/i_ as they both unsealed their suits. "Ah, the recycled air from a ship is fresh compared to having to breathe from these suits," Ar'n grumbled.

"Ar'nâ€|you complain too much," Garek whispered, shaking his head in the dim light. "We should be right above the hallway leading to the Command Deckâ€|and the Jiralhanae definitely have control of it."

"How would you know that?"

"Can you not smell them? Or did drinking alcohol for so long ruin your sense of smell?"

"I can smell them, I just didn't want to remark on it, seeing as I 'complain too much'," he returned evenly. "Which way?"

"Turn around and move forward, it should be the fifth grate on the left." Ar'n nodded and began moving as quietly as he could in the tunnel; it was cramped, even for him. The sounds of a commotion became audible, each break followed by booming laughter.

"Ugh, Jiralhanae. I wonder what they find so funny by the Gods!"

"What is it?" The shorter Sangheili made room as best he could, Garek's eyes going wide at the display below.

12. Chapter XI: Two Worlds

Chapter XI: Two Worlds

**ibLocation: Covenant Loyalist-held Assault Carrier/i**
**_

**ibDate: November 5, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)/i**

**ibShip Clock: 23:20 hours /i**

Z'aes signaled for Raja to take the lead through the maze of hallways and doors that led to empty rooms; the latter was considered a priority in Covenant ships to confuse and thwart boarders. He was thankful that he had access to the ship's blueprints every time Raja looked at him questioningly before a locked door. Finally, Raja broke the tense silence between them. "Where is everyone? These halls are as quiet as well, the dead."

"And you talking may wake them from their slumber," Z'aes hissed. "You don't know what lurks around the next corner, so it would be best if you just shut your trap, Raja. Got it?" He and Raja hadn't gotten along well during their short training for the Rangers, but he pushed the reason behind it to the back of his mind. i_"No. I will not let him live down the way he insulted Orna. Even if he preferred the company of one of his brothers over a female, he was twice the warrior this whelp is,/i" _he thought.

Raja clenched and unclenched his fists. "Excuse me for wanting to fight these murderers. Who have you lost that you held dear, hmm?" Z'aes knew there was a sneer beneath that helmet. "Oh, how could I forget about-"

"Do you honestly think Orna and I were sleeping together? We had been friends since childhood, and it came as a shock when I found out he was different, which gave me all the more reason to defend him against close-minded, arrogant bigots like you. This is not the time or place to discuss such matters, but I will end it on this note. Orna may have been a homosexual, but he was a damn good friend and twice, if not thrice, the warrior you will ever hope to be!"

Raja's fists remained closed, but his shoulders suddenly slumped in defeat. "Apologies, Z'aes I went too far," he forced out. "Just give me the directions to the holding cells so I don't have to question you at every damned door."

Z'aes nodded, satisfied that he was able to get Raja off of his metaphorical high. He brought up his wrist computer and traced a line through the hallways from their position to the holding cells. They

were much closer than even he expected, and he motioned for Raja to stop at an intersection in the corridor. "You're about to get the fight you want, Raja. Ar'n is already in the ship's network and watching security feeds, and this next hallway is a long one," he paused to sigh, "It would seem that the Jiralhanae in this section have taken the rooms on both sides of the hall, and they're all occupied. We have a decision to make, and I certainly hope you know what the better choice is..."

"Sneak past, or announce our presence and fight? My hearts are screaming to pick the latter, but I am not a complete fool, Z'aes. The question that lies within our options is: do they know whether or not we are here?"

Raja had a fair point; the Jiralhanae may know of their presence and be waiting around the corner in numbers—but, that wasn't their style. If they knew, he and Raja would have been swarmed already. "I doubt it. Only one way to find out, I suppose. I'll take point this time." He peered around the corner and caught a glimpse of several distortions in the air, much to his dismay. He sighed in false relief, audible enough for the defenders to hear. He spoke to Raja loudly, while signaling to him the amount of distortions he saw, "It is all clear, Raja. Let us go before these bastards exit their rooms and discover us." Raja nodded at the signals, but tilted his head in a manner that told him he was overdoing it. "I'm a warrior and tactician, not a damn actor. They won't be able to tell the difference, anyway," he whispered while checking the core on his Type-50 Concussion Rifle. He nodded to Raja and ran to the other side of the intersection while the latter prepared to activate and throw three plasma grenades at once.

One of the charges audibly stuck to one of the cloaked Jiralhanae, but Raja cursed loudly when the orb floated around the corner at chest height. He kicked the Brute back in a flash of panic, and Z'aes' eyes widened as he quickly overcharged and locked his shields. The still-cloaked warrior roared, furious at his defeat as he bumped into him. He was unmoved by the weight of the beast and quickly-proceeding explosion, but the heat was overwhelming. He felt his throat immediately go dry and his lungs screamed from the lack of oxygen. When the fire subsided, he ripped the helmet from his head, tore into his survival kit, and ripped open the one of the small pouches of emergency water. He coughed violently as his hearing returned, the sounds of combat raging around him. "Z'aes, you're alive! That's great! Now, could you lend me i_a fucking hand/i_?"

"I appreciate your concern! Oh, and thanks for kicking that Jiralhanae into me, asshole!"

Raja actually laughed as he slid back behind his cover. "You're quite welcome, brother! Any time you need a helping hand, I'll be there!" Z'aes couldn't help but share in the laugh, but the moment quickly passed. The majority of the Jiralhanae had chosen stealth over armor, showing that they were either growing smarter as a species —"Gods forbid"—or that their leader wasn't one of them. The hallway was soon smothered in the deep burgundy of Jiralhanae blood, their corpses littering the floor. Raja crushed one's skull beneath a hoof, roaring at the body, triumphant.

"Feel better now?"

"Yes," he said with a nod. "But, at the same time, noâ€|Z'aes?"

"Hmm?"

"If you ever have thoughts of vengeance, let them pass. Carrying it out just leaves you feelingâ€|" Raja trailed off, searching for the proper word.

"Cold and empty?"

"Yeahâ€|satisfied, but empty. One more thing," Z'aes simply nodded as they began walking down the littered and scarred hallway, "I'mâ€|sorry about being such an ass before. When it's drilled into your head that beingâ€|that way is wrong and leaves you unhappy, for the majority of your childhood, you can't help but feel that way until someone proves otherwise. Orna was happy with what he wasâ€|right?"

"Apology accepted, but we'll discuss this later. We need to focus."

"Right. Again, I apologize."

"It's fine. These are difficult times, after all; we _all_ have something distracting us," Z'aes said flatly, though inside, he was worried. He mumbled a short prayer for Orna's soul and his consort back on Delta Halo, Yuri 'Vaijec, as a token of good faith to his newfound deity. i_"Guide and protect them, Zudaâ€|ensure that they make it Home."/i_ He shook his head when Raja tapped him on the shoulder, other voices now audible.

"Youâ€|are outsiders. Tell me, brothers, please tell me that you despise the Prophets for what they are doing to us," a Minor younger than Ar'n said. He had been beaten the worst of the lot; his right eye was swollen shut, while the left side of his face looked as though it had been crushed underfoot. He there were also several lacerations from a Jiralhanae blade across his abdomen, Z'aes realizing that it formed the Mark of Shame. Z'aes quickly deactivated the barrier to his cell and placed a small capsule under the Minor's nostrils. "A painkiller? I would be gratefulâ€|"

"Minor Domo Z'aes 'Xaser, 482nd Ranger Division, brother. Take it and have a seat within the cell. We have doctors that are bound to arrive within the hour."

"Thank you, Z'aes 'Xaser. My name is Kalâ€|Kal," he repeated himself many times before finally shrugging. "My surname will come to me eventually. Ever since that Chieftan discovered me and kicked my head against the wallâ€|"

"Just relax, Kal. This ship will be under Separatist control shortly, brothers. If there are any Loyalists being detained, you have a choice to make. Either you remain loyal to your cause and stay locked away, or you pledge allegiance to Spec Ops Commander Rtas 'Vadum and, in turn, the Arbiter," he said to the rest of the room. He noticed several of them immediately pick the side of the Commander, while a few hesitated to answer. He labeled them as possible Loyalists and started asking them individually whose side they chose while thinking, i_"I wonder how Garek and Ar'n are faring in their

task."/i_

**ibShip Clock: 23:41 Hours/i**

Garek came back to reality with heavy breaths and the feeling of a hand on his left shoulder. He could smell the stench of blood filling the room, the most powerful being that of the Jiralhanae. His lids slid back to reveal his bloodied gauntlets, and as he stared, a voice softly said, "Garekâ€|are you all right?"

That was Ar'n, his trusted scout and a good friend. The shorter Sangheili rarely showed outright concern for other's wellbeing, but Garek realized that people, along with time, changedâ€|and these were trying times, indeed. "Iâ€|I think so. What happened?" He finally sat up, resting on his haunches as he surveyed his handiwork.

"Wellâ€|"

**ib20 Minutes Earlierâ€|/i**

Ar'n glanced at Garek when he growled loudly, not really thinking anything of it; many Sangheili growled when they were frustrated or angry. But this growlâ€|something about it was different, whether it was the tone or the fact that it was coming from someone who was usually calm and kept a level head, he wasn't sure. It almost soundedâ€|feral. "Garek," he whispered.

His superior shook his head briefly, still unable to turn his eyes away from the sight below. "What?" he hissed.

"What's the plan? If we don't hurry, it will only be the two of us to take out i_all/i _of those Jiralhanaeâ€|and those are odds I would rather not bet on." He seemed to consider it, tilting his head slightly until a new sound got his attention. Their translators did their job, transmitting the speech into their helmet speakers.

"This one seems to have a little bit more fight in him," one of the Jiralhanae, a Minor, said as he dragged a struggling Sangheili into the room. The growl started again as they both recognized the Major in a pilot's armor harness. "He does not smell like a warrior, but he certainly curses and swings like one."

"Get your putrid hands off of me, you fucking ape," Rypa boomed. His face was cut and bruised, his mandibles dislocated and blood seeped from his nostril slits. The Jiralhanae readily dropped him, Rypa suppressing a cry as he hit the deck face-first.

"Stop weeping like one of your pathetic children and stand, heretic. Stand and face your fateâ€|for our amusement!" The Chieftan tossed a sword hilt between Rypa's splayed hands. "Master 'Sanovai, make this one last and I will see to it that you are recognized by the Prophets as a true hero of the Covenant; more so than any past Arbiter, Fleet Master, or even High Councilor."

"Sanovai," Ar'n trailed off with a murmur. "Oh, shit. Garekâ€|"

Garek ripped the helmet from his head, his growl growing in intensity as he brought his Type-50 to bear. Ar'n heard a drop of spittle hit

the floor as he watched Garek's knuckles darken, his grip on the weapon causing the handle and casing to creak under the pressure. He fired and Ar'n could only watch as Rypa's face was suddenly splattered with Ihro 'Sanov's blood and brain matter.

Garek roared like an animal before swinging his legs through the grating and landing silently on the deck below. When he spoke, Ar'n's translator simply flashed five words in the corner of his b**HUD: NO TRANSLATION AVAILABLE, LANGUAGE UNKNOWN**/b. He knew rage when he heard it, however, and Garek had kept it short and to the point, whatever that may have been.

The Jiralhanae simply burst into laughter when he activated his wrist blades and swung his head in a "come on" motion. "I like this one! Such aggression and understanding of what it means to be a true warrior! He is not weighed by morals or sense of self-preservationâ€¦it is a shame that he has to die," the Chieftan said with a grin, though Ar'n could see the uncertainty in his eyes from the vent. "Tell me, warrior, what is your name? I would like to have a small plaque made in your honor, so I will always remember your name when I look at your head mounted on my wall."

Garek snapped his mandibles, clearing the collected spittle away. "Garek 'Izak is my name, Brute, and I plan on returning home with my head intact. I do not care for your name, for, were it up to me, I would leave your foul body to rot where it fell," he said haughtily. "Do not bother calling off your excuses for warriors, I can handle them all. In fact, I want all of them to attack as one."

The Chieftan sneered. "If it is a painful death you want, then it is one you will get."

"I wouldn't believe it had I not seen it with my own eyes," Ar'n said when he was finished. "You moved likeâ€¦like a God. Nothing but a flurry of blades and bloodâ€¦"

"It sounds more like I became a savage," Garek muttered, disgusted by the fact that he knew Ar'n wasn't lying. "Butâ€¦where are Rypa and the bodies? Why does only the blood remain?"

"Our attack in this section of the ship is over. The others quickly removed the bodies and helped Rypa to a secure room to tend to his wounds, and I demanded that you be allowed some space while youâ€¦calmed down." Ar'n knelt beside him and lightly punched his arm, "So I'll ask again. Are you all right?"

Garek sighed before standing and making for the door. "Yeah, I have never felt better."

"Garek, wait." He turned and caught the Type-50. "Don't want to forget that, do you?"

Garek didn't share his friend's grin, however. He felt stronger now, but at the same time weaker, as if someone had punched him in the gut immediately after a meal. He slid his helmet back on to hide his expression, but he knew Ar'n had already seen it. "What did you mean by our fight in this section is over?"

"I meant just that. This portion â€" the most important one, I might add â€" is under our control. What's left of our little party is now

trying to clear the lower decks of any and all Loyalists."

"How many have we lost?"

"Quite a few; most of them had decided to side with Ihro, and they paid for it with their lives. Joka 'Ruwan was the first to feel the sting of betrayal."

"This is madness," Garek muttered. "The Commander is running out of trustworthy warriors to replace his Sub-Commanderâ€¦"

"Oh, Joka is still very much alive. He had to hold his entrails in for most of the battle, but he's one tough bastard. He's in the nearest medical ward if you would like a brief wordâ€¦"

"No, we need to help our brothers if we have been short-handed."

"Bear with me for a moment." Garek tilted his head, so Ar'n continued, "Z'aes and Raja only found a handful of prisoners in the holding cells, but discovered that those had simply been scouts or messengers for our brothers holding out in rooms all across the ship. Our party has already linked with a few of theirs and is gaining more and more speed as they move through the lower section."

"It would seem that the odds are tipping to our favor, then."

"Better late than never, I have heard the humans say. We should report to the Commander before we set off for the lower decks, in case he has other need of us." Garek nodded and motioned for him to take the lead. They soon came to a loading bay, finding Rtas quietly discussing something with a depressed-looking Rypa.

"â€¦no need to be ashamed, Rypa 'Cazar. I am at fault for sending you after a traitor into enemy-held territory with no backup or experience," they caught before Rtas turned around. Garek saw Rypa instantly grow wary of his presence in the room. "Ah, Major 'Izak, I see that you haveâ€¦collected yourself. Yes, Ihro's actions were unfortunate, however expected. I suppose I should thank you for taking him down the way you did. Rypa will be taking you back to our encampment to gather the medical staff and whatever supplies can fit onto the Phantom."

"Yes sir," he saluted as Rtas made for the exit. He looked to Rypa, who was trying his best to keep his gaze away from Garek.

"Rypaâ€¦"

"Thank you," the pilot simply murmured, though his voice quivered.

"I did not mean to frighten you, Rypa. Iâ€¦don't know what happened."

"I am not afraid, merelyâ€¦rattled. When you spoke in that languageâ€¦it sounded as if the Gods themselves were speaking. Dare I say it wasâ€¦humph, beautiful, however unsettling. Such a thing hasn't happened forâ€¦well, millennia," he said as they stepped onto the craft.

"Keep it to yourselves. I don't want everyone gawking at me like some sort of freak," Garek said.

"It's a little late for that. The Commander asked me what had happened, and I couldn't help but tell him," Ar'n said. "He simply nodded and said that they have been expecting you, Garek."

Garek put the question of who could be expecting the likes of him away for later. "I wonder how everyone down here fared," he thought aloud, changing the subject. He looked to the Phantom's viewscreens and caught glimpses of damage to the exterior of buildings, and they were recent. "Stay a safe distance above the ground, Rypa. Ar'n and I will use the gravity lift." Rypa simply nodded as he keyed a few glyphs and set the vehicle to hover one-hundred thirty feet from the soil. As they touched down, Garek signaled for Ar'n to run and check the tent he had last seen the medical personnel enter when they left. He decided to go with a common Spec Ops mantra and called, "To live by Blade and Shadowâ€¦"

"Is to die with Honor," Razo whispered from beside him, deactivating his cloak. "You never cease to surprise me, Garek 'Izak."

"What happened here? Did the Jiralhanae-"

"No. A group of humans found us and immediately opened fire before we could try to reason with them. Blasted foolsâ€¦Anyway, he had to kill all but two. One ran while the other, the leader I suppose, was captured and is now being looked over by our medical staff." Razo audibly winced when he rolled a shoulder in a shrug, "The bastard is a damn good shot, too. It would have been my neck if I hadn't movedâ€¦"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine; the round passed through cleanly, nothing vital was hit. It burns like the fires of Hell, thoughâ€¦almost like plasma, but not hot enough to kill the nerve endings." Garek looked at the wound more closely and saw that the skin had turned black around the entry and exit holes, the smell of singed flesh evident. He could see the artificial daylight through the wound and wondered how Razo wasn't showing more pain. "It hurts, but we i_Azr'sju/i _are conditioned to be able to tolerate such things."

"Incendiary ammunition," Garek muttered, "As if being hit isn't bad enoughâ€¦"

"It's very crude and cowardly, but effective, to say the least. Desperate times call for desperate measures, they say."

"Garek! You may want to come and see this," Ar'n suddenly called from the tent's entrance.

"I know about the human, Ar'n. Make sure that it gets on the Phantom unharmedâ€¦the others haven't tried to harm the human, have they?"

"No. They, me included, have no prejudices against humans, just a general dislike due to dead comradesâ€¦but, war is war. Everyone has a side, and they picked theirs a couple of decades ago. Until something changes, we are going to detain them, simple as

that."

Garek nodded, accepting the explanation; his views were quite similar to theirs. "We need to get the Phantom loaded before more humans or Jiralhanae show up. Do we have anything of priority other than arms and rations?"

"Not much. We have a handful of medical supplies left over from what wounds we could treat. Other than that and some communications equipment," Razo trailed off with a shrug. They turned as Ar'n led the hooded human by an arm, his Type-25 pistol pressed against the human's back. The human was speaking to Ar'n in that language they had heard on the first Halo, the pronunciations sharp and angry sounding, though the tone didn't match such emotion; the human actually sounded interested in what was happening, no fear present. "I have heard several of their languages, and can speak a couple, but that particular one eludes me. Do you know of it?"

"No, but I have heard it before. Must be a dead language," Garek shrugged while walking into the tent, finding Deza and Shara frantically looking over another wounded *i_Azr'sju_i*. "We don't have much time, Deza. Can he be moved before you finish?"

"If he moves in this condition, he dies. Heâ€¦_idemanded/i _that we operate on him, oddly enough. He's in rough shape, though. We can't get the bleeding to stop, nor can we find the source of it."

Razo was about to tell them to leave him when Shara suddenly exclaimed, "Aha! Deza, hand me a clamp, I found it." She fumbled with the human instrument for a moment, her four-digit hand not designed for such a tool. "Do you see it now, Deza? Could you close it up while I hold it?"

Deza nodded and resealed the tears in each vein Shara indicated. "Good eye. Let's get him closed up; we've done what we can for now. I wonder how he'll take the news of being down to a single heartâ€¦"

"Who, Hijo?" Razo said suddenly. "Heh, bastard always did enjoy a challengeâ€¦"

"Your enthusiasm is refreshing, Razo, butâ€¦"

"I know. His days on the battlefield are over. But, he did always say he wanted to teach younglings the Artâ€¦I suppose now he'll get the chance much earlier than he expected."

Hijo gasped sharply when Deza stuck him with a waking hypo. "Shit. Am I dead?" he said, placing both hands over his face while remaining on his back.

"Not yet, brother. Try to stand, carefully," Deza said.

"Say what you will about humansâ€¦they have some damn good painkillers. I think I can make it to the Phantom, at least. Thank you, ladies. I shall live to fight another day."

"Actually, I need to discuss something with you while they gather supplies," Deza said, leading him out of the tent.

Shara gave a small smile when Garek looked to her questioningly. "Do you, ahâ€¦need some help gathering supplies, Major?"

"No, you have done enough. Go and see if you can't get Rypa in better spirits," Garek suggested, she nodding and heading off.

While he and Razo began gathering what they could, the latter grunted. "What I would i_not/i _give to lay with a woman such as thatâ€¦"

"What's stopping you?" Garek wasn't sure why his tone was suddenly guarded; he didn't feel anything for Sharaâ€¦did he?

He shook his head to drive away such distracting thoughts while Razo said, "I'm not allowed to, except for the sole purpose of bearing a child. Even then, it has to be with another i_Azr'sju/i_."

"There are female i_Azr'sju/i_?"

"Yes, but only back home. They handle the moreâ€¦political side of our work. They try to reason with local councils or with kaidons, and if that fails, we are sent in to eliminate them. We use the same approach with high-ranking officers out here in the field. When diplomacy fails," he shrugged. Garek merely hummed in response and put his focus back on the task at hand. Razo rigged whatever human equipment remained to explode, explaining that by doing so, they would be able to fit more rations onto the Phantom; something that they would need.

Before Garek could step into the cockpit with Shara and Rypa, the human spoke again, "You there, Clint Eastwood."

Garek had no idea what a 'Clint Eastwood' was, but he guessed that the human had been talking to him. "Yes, human?"

"You sound like you're in charge around here. Where are we going?"

"What does it matter to you?"

"Well, surely you're from a ship. I would like to speak to your Captain."

"Shipmaster," Garek corrected, "and, why?"

"You're fighting with the Brutes, right? Been cast out of the Covenant?"

Garek didn't know if the human was well informed or just guessing and getting lucky. "We have always been fighting them, just not on such a large â€" or open, for that matter â€" scale. If you want to propose an alliance, I wish you luck. However, you and I both know that it would not last after this war ends. There has been too much bloodshed between us for such an existence."

"True, but you Elites seem like the reasonable type. We humans have a saying."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I doubt that proverb holds any weight in this case, human," Ar'n said.

"Well, I disagree. We could use this to further each other's goals. We help you get revenge, and you help us stop the Rings from firing, thus ensuring our survival. Everybody winsâ€|on our side, at least."

"We would need a fleetâ€| no, i_fleets/i_ to even stand a chance. Even then, nothing we have can stand against the Dreadnought."

"Hmm. How's that shoulder, by the way? Still burning?"

Razo stifled a growl. "You should feel lucky to even be alive, human."

"Should I?"

Razo huffed tiredly and the troop bay fell silent once again. Garek opted to enter the cockpit and found Rypa telling Shara about what happened back on the ship. "â€|and then, his head exploded right before my eyes. And thenâ€|Garekâ€|appeared," he stopped upon noticing the very Sangheili he was speaking about standing behind him.

"I thought we had a deal, Rypa. Are you really so quick to betray my trust in you?" Garek glared.

"She called me out on it! Said that she wouldn't go away unless I told her," he stammered.

"Then, by all means, continue. I would like to hear what happened, as well. My memory has the tendency to fail me as of late." He was about to reprimand the pilot for hesitating, but a hand on his shoulder caused him pause.

"If the matter is that sensitive, I will leave it be. I wasâ€|merely concerned about you," Shara whispered.

He looked her in the face and gently shrugged the hand away. "I haven't need of your concern. You don't even know meâ€|I'm just another name to you." Anger and hurt flashed across her features and disappeared again before he could blink.

"You're right. I don't know youâ€|nor do I want to."

He sighed and plopped into the chair next to Rypa as she stormed out of the cockpit. What in the wicked names of the Seven Hells had he just done? He had his reasons for going to that clinic other than finding i_just/i_ survivors, he knew thatâ€|but he had no reason as to why he went after her, specifically. He could have just left it to the Gods to decide their fates, or had they already? Such mental ramblings quickly brought a headache. He barely registered that Rypa had asked him something. "What?"

"I said, what's happened to you? The Garek 'Izak I knew before, however little, did not act this way. To anyone, not even hisâ€|rivals, for lack of a better term."

"What have I to show other than hostility in these troubled times? Anyone I get close to, I lose. This war has shown me that much, Rypa. Sure, there are others out there that are worse off than I, but does

knowing that lessen theâ€|emotional baggage? No."

"Do you know how many times I have closed this very door at a drop zone, only to hear the cries of those I've condemned beyond? Why do you think Phantom pilots are called 'Hell's Ferrymen'? Why do we receive no recognition for bringing troops back safely? I have seen many faces in that bay, but your squad's is the most consistent. Will I ever get the 'honorable death' our kind craves, dreams of? No, likely not," Rypa said flatly, his eyes never leaving the viewscreen before him. "Humph, you should consider yourself lucky."

"I don't believe in luck, it would do nothing for me. I still stand by my opinion."

"Well, you shouldn't. Not knowing who died, when their blood is on your hands, is much worse than not knowing their names, their facesâ€|i_who/i_ they were. You may remember them, but if you keep this mindset, will they remember i_you/i_ when the time comes?" Rypa finally looked him in the face and said with an air of finality, "Showing compassion for others, be they brother or stranger, is i_not/i_ a weakness. Some would tell you otherwise, but they are hypocrites, guilty of their self-proclaimed crime."

"That's touching, Rypa 'Cazar," Razo said, leaning through the doorway. "It truly is. I suppose we all have our burdens. It comes with sentience. Major 'Izak, Commander 'Vadum would like to speak with you privately."

"I'll be a moment." Razo nodded and disappeared once again. "Thank you, Rypa. What you lack in being a warrior, you make up for with wisdom and common sense, a rare thing of someone your age. You will make quite the flight instructor someday. Perhaps even a kaidon."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far. I'm just a stupid pilot," he smiled. "And no, thank i_you/i_ for allowing me to ramble."

He stepped off of the Phantom to find Rtas assigning Shara and Deza to their sections. "Officer 'Telam, I want you to take Minor 'Hesum under your charge and setup in Medical Ward 3-A. Major 'Truvor, already being aboard this ship when we arrived, will show you the way. Major 'Izak, follow me." They was a collective 'Yes, Commander' before everyone dispersed.

Rtas led him past the Command Deck and down an adjoining corridor, a single door at the end. Neither spoke a word for the entire walk and a tense silence remained after they were within, Garek realized, the Shipmaster's quarters. "Sit," he said simply, indicating a table with chairs on either side.

"To what-"

"This is a time for you to listen, Garek 'Izak. You will only speak when I ask you to. Am I understood?"

"Yes sir."

Rtas nodded and finally sat across from him. "Where to beginâ€|hmm. I suppose I should be blunt, given the current circumstances. Myâ€|organization has been waiting for you to arrive. Have you any

idea what I speak of?" Garek simply shook his head in the negative, so he continued, "You believe in the ways of the Ancients, raised to follow Zuda. The path you walk is not by choice, nor was it forced on you like the Journey was, but it is your destiny to follow and serve Her. In the near future, our people will come into a time of great conflict. Greater than thisâ€¦i_game/i_ the Prophets call war, or this Schism. No, things will go back to how they were when They first left us alone on our world; one family, tribe, what have you, fighting another over trivial things. Faith has led us to Calamityâ€¦"

"â€¦but I, the Champion, fight not in the name of Faith. I fight in the name of Truth, and Forgiveness," Garek finished. "Mother had always loved that passageâ€¦"

"What I'm saying, as I'm sure you have gathered, is that i_you/i _are the next in line. You followed Her from birth, and She has chosen you. When our kind is on the brink of self-extinction, you will step up, just as She did ages ago, and take your place as the Champion, the Martyr."

"i_Xa Y'jirakesh/i_," he muttered. "How do you know this? How can you be certain?"

"You are not the only one whoâ€¦ 'communicates'. Who do you think served at Her side, who she fought and died alongside? The i_Azr'sju/i _outdates the Council. We were the previous government's best warriors, and were sworn to her allegiance when that fell apart."

"You preceded the Honor Guards?"

"Yes and no. A large number of our ancestors created the Guard under a few of our guidelines, but added many new ideals. We are different branches of the organization, I suppose. We handle theâ€¦ 'dirty work', while they handle the protection."

They remained silent for a time, Garek mulling over what he had been told and Rtas waiting patiently for what the former had to say. "Soâ€¦I am to die for myâ€¦our people? What makes you think that my death will actually change their - whoever they will be â€" minds? The way things were in the Old Times are gone, lost to time and because of theâ€¦i_bastards/i _we accepted as our masters."

"The People may not know when this particular event comes, but i_you/i _will. There's really no way to explain it, you will simply know what's happeningâ€¦and you will know what to do."

"What if I refuse? What if our kind deserves to die out? What if it's the natural order of things?"

"The Gods decide the natural order of things, Garek 'Izak. You know this, deep within your mind. It may not be obvious i_now/i_, but when it comes down to it, you will think 'How did I not see this sooner?'. And please, don't insult me with what-ifs. Neither of us believes in them, nor do we believe in coincidence."

The intercom chimed before Garek could think of something else to say. i_"Commander, we have received an incoming transmission from a Phantomâ€¦the pilot says that he knows you?"/i_

"Patch it through to my private comm, Major 'Truvor. Well, I had said what needed saying, anyway. If you would, report to 'Truvor and have him lead you to the nearby armory. There should be a proper helmet for you thereâ€|and a new bodysuit."

"Yes sir."

"Oh, one last thing. It's just something I have always doneâ€|when in a private conversation, feel free to call me by name."

"Of course...Rtas, was it?"

"Aye."

"Well, this talk brought many things that have been on my mind to light. Thank you for clarifying what I have seen only in my dreams. If you speak with Her any time soon, tell her that I will be ready." Rtas simply nodded and sat before his personal terminal in the room. Garek sought out the Major and got his gear back up to par. "Could you just point me in the direction of Medical Ward 3-A? I'm sure you're quite busyâ€|"

"Voro. Just head down one deck, Level 3, and find the first ward on the left, A. There are signs on the walls, you can't miss it," the Major shrugged.

"Thank you." Garek headed in the appropriate direction in hopes that a certain doctor wasn't too busy when he arrived. He had an apology to make, after all.

13. Epilogue: The Path Least Taken

Epilogue: The Path Least Taken

**Location: Covenant Loyalist-held Assault Carrier, the Shadow of Intent**

**Date: November 6, 2552 (UNSC Calendar)**

**Ship Clock: 00:27 hours **

Shara went about checking various patients with a blank expression; inside, however, she was a mess. _"First, the security alarms begin to wail and the Jiralhanae break into District 4, then my brother gets attacked by that raving lunatic of a Zealot and the Demonâ€|and, Garek 'Izak happens upon me, leads me to the safety of allied forcesâ€|only to turn me away from any kind of relationship?" _She quietly sighed, getting Deza's attention. "Perhaps I was wrong about himâ€|"

"Wrong about whom, Shara?"

Shara felt like telling her that it was none of her concern, but thought better of it as she may be able to get some answers from Deza. "Garek 'Izakâ€|"

"Alright, what were you wrong about?" Deza nodded at the look she gave and gestured for her office. Once they were seated within,

"Well? I need to know what's on your mind, so you will be able to do your job without hesitation."

"Well, you know that he went searching for me back on _High Charity_—and, I thought that by saving me, he would, at least, want me to repay him somehow—"

"Garek is at a difficult time in his life right now, Shara. He recently lost someone close to him, and that on top of his current mental and physical condition—he just wants to be left alone. What he needs more than anything is a friend, Shara. Someone who will listen to what he has to say and get his meaning without being intrusive."

"You sound as though you were lover once—"

Deza scoffed. "Oh, I wish. One of my sisters had that honor when they were younger—He's handsome, is he not?"

"I don't know," Shara sighed. "What if he really doesn't want me as a friend? I must repay him, somehow."

"Garek knows that you want to repay him, but he doesn't _want _you to do so. He doesn't indebt people, because—"

"It is my job." Shara looked up at him from her seat, finally taking the time to study his face. He did have a handsome face, but that was ruined by the lack of emotion on it. "You owe me nothing, Shara 'Hesum—I, however, owe you something."

"You do?"

"Yes, an apology. I'm sorry—for being such an inconsiderate, self-absorbed jackass." With that, he nodded and turned in the doorway, moving to replace his helmet as he walked.

"Garek, wait!" He paused, looking back, "You are none of those things. If you were, I—no, likely none of us would be here at this moment." The smile she was looking for finally appeared. "Could we talk more after my shift is over?" She heard Deza stifle a laugh when his face just barely turned purple.

"Ah—sure, if I'm not busy at the time, that is. Lots to do, you know—"

Shara nodded with a smile of her own, which only caused the purple to become more pronounced. "I do know. You may want to put your helmet on before turning around, Garek—"

"I know. See you later, Shara, Deza."

"You had better watch yourself, Shara. I think he likes you."

"Oh, you think?" Shara laughed. "I think I like him, as well."

"Just—don't rush him into anything. He learned that the hard way with my sister," Deza said, her tone now serious. "Don't mention her, anything about his dreams, or his brother."

"Why?"

"Because those are the key things that have put him in thisâ€¦down-trodden state-of-mind."

"More so than this betrayal?"

"No, thisâ€¦civil war has been added to that, but he has been feeling this way since the Reach invasion." Deza suddenly sighed, "Well, back to work. See if you can do something for that Minor on the end."

Garek sighed as he sat next to Ar'n and Rotje in the empty mess hall. "Brothersâ€¦I think I'm in loveâ€¦" They looked at each other and promptly burst into booming laughter. "What? I'm not lyingâ€¦"

"With whom?" Rotje snickered. "Don't tell me you decided to hop the fence and go after Z'aesâ€¦" They began laughing again until Garek growled at them.

"No, with Shara 'Hesumâ€¦"

"Oh, please. She is out of your league, brother," Ar'n said lightly. "A woman as beautiful as that could pick any male she wanted, and I doubt, highly, that you are near the top of her listâ€¦ah, no offense."

Garek glared at him shortly before smiling, "None taken. I bet that I'm higher on the list than either of you."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, Rotje, you're seeing Deza. And you, Ar'nâ€¦you're just an emotional time bomb waiting to go off."

"That stings," Ar'n said lowly. "That was a little too far, brotherâ€¦"

"I'm sorry."

"Ah, it's all right. I'm not ready for someone new, not yet. Now, a good lay on the other handâ€¦What _is_ Shara doing later?"

"_I _will be having dinner with Garek, if you must know. Now scoot over, runt."

"I like her already," he muttered with obvious sarcasm, complying with her demand.

"You will, in time. And, I don't have a list of potential mates for one reason: I'm a doctor. No one wants to be caught with a doctor."

"Well, I guess I'm not part of that group," Rotje said. "I'm in a relationship with a doctorâ€¦"

"I know, Deza told me. You are a very lucky male to have such a strong, beautiful woman."

"You think so?"

"I know so. I hope you two find happiness with each other, especially in times like these."

"Thank you. Ar'n, I think we should go elsewhere, brother."

Garek and Shara both nodded their thanks as they stood. "So," the latter began, "What are your feelings on all of this?"

"I sort ofâ€¦saw it coming," he sighed. "I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner, really." Garek sat quietly for a moment and stared contemplatively at the tabletop while Shara patiently waited for him to continue. Thoughts of what he had seen only while sleeping surfaced, followed by those on the subject of trust. "Shara," he began, "I have a question for you."

"Then ask, and I will answer to the best of my abilities."

"Can I place my trust in you? That you will not share anything ofâ€¦sensitive nature with anyone, unless I give exceptions or permission?"

He looked at her with those yellow-green eyes, the usual brilliance within tainted by worry and doubt. She didn't, in all honesty, know if he _could _trust her with whatever sensitive information he thought about giving her. "Well, Garek, it depends. What are you going to tell me that could get us into trouble? You don't plan onâ€¦assassinating the Arbiter, do you?" she said lowly.

"What? No, nothing of that nature, but just as dangerous. It pertains to-

"Major 'Izak, we have a new arrival. I believe that you may know him," Voro 'Truvor suddenly called from the mess hall entrance. "And Specialist 'Hesum, Chief 'Telam has requested that you return to the proper medical ward at once. We just got a fresh group of wounded."

"Whatever it is you have to say, Garek, just know that I will listen intently. It is the least I can do to repay what you have done for me." He simply nodded over his shoulder as he walked, that troubled look still in his eyes. She sighed, slightly irked at the interruption; she had wanted Garek to tell her a little about himself. _"You will have another chance, Shara. Deza said he was shy, but he seems to have no trouble speaking to meâ€¦or her, for that matter. Perhaps I can get something from her insteadâ€¦"_

Garek found himself standing before the door to the loading bay Voro had indicated just as Rtas walked out. The Commander had a sullen, and frightened, look in his eyes when he looked to Garek. "He refused to speak to me, demanded that he see you firstâ€¦it must be the wounds," he muttered.

"Wounds," Garek said. "Wounds from what, sir?"

The fear in his eyes increased threefold and he shook his head. "I must go, I am needed elsewhere." He shook his head at the Commander's back, confused; no one had told him _who _had arrived yet. With a shrug, he decided to enter the bay and see what was going onâ€¦and the sight was _not _pretty.

Nazo sat on one of the Phantom's lowered doors, trying to wipe blood away from his face and armor with an already-soaked towel. He simply looked up at Garek from his seat for several minutes; his eyes were empty, emotionless. Suddenly, he spoke and gestured to the blood-splattered troop bay behind him, "Deadâ€|all dead, every last oneâ€|" He paused with a wince, placing a hand over a gash in his side. "Damn it, that burns."

"What happened, Nazo?"

"The Flood happenedâ€|they killed everyone, save for me and one otherâ€|he fled when Garse 'Haerok got infectedâ€|left me to fight wave after waveâ€|after fucking wave, alone." Garek blinked at his vulgarity, but he remembered his brief meeting with Garse. The man had been quite the joker, and he hadn't been much older than Garek. Nazo continued, though he struggled to speak; his blood was dripping rapidly onto the deck below them. "I was just fortunate enough to get out of there alive with just thisâ€|scratch."

"Sir, you need medical attention."

"Bullshit, I'm fine. Nothing a tourniquet and some alcohol won't fixâ€|"

Garek chuckled, beside himself, "Taking after Ar'n, are we?" His smile dropped when Nazo just kept looking at him with that same blank expression. "Well, come on. You should really get to a medical ward."

"I will be fine."

"You will die within the hour if you don't get that looked at!" Nazo growled at him quietly, but remained seated. "Get your ass up and get to Medical Ward 3-A."

"You do not give me orders, 'Izak. I outrank-

"Damn the rank! We have lost enough Rangers already; we do not need one less!" He grabbed Nazo up by the shoulder pads and hissed, "What they need is a leader, and a damn good one. Are you so willing to leave us lost, Nazo, at a time such as this?"

He looked into the troop bay one last time and sighed. "No, I am not willing to do such a thing. Lead me in the right direction, Garek; you know more about this ship than I do." Garek nodded and supported Nazo's wounded side, foreseeing the struggle the Ultra would have in making it alone. Many warriors stepped from their path as Garek practically dragged the Ultra through the ship; there was a mix of disdain, disgust, respect, and awe in the eyes of each being passed and more than a few asked if they could help them, but Garek kindly refused. Apparently, word spread fast because Deza and Shara were waiting at the entrance of 3-A.

"Location and severity," Deza demanded shortly, walking ahead of them.

"He has a laceration across his abdomen, and he's been bleeding for Gods' only know how long. I can't tell you if he's injured elsewhere from the coating of blood and lack of him saying so." He glanced at

the Ultra and sighed, seeing that his eyes were closed. "He's lost consciousness, I suggest that you hurry."

"There are others we must attend to, others that take priority."

"I will see to him," Shara said, supporting Nazo's other side. "Even if we have other, more severe cases Deza, Garek _could _order us to make this Ultra a priority. He does have that powerâ€|"

"But I wouldn't do such a thing. Get him stabilized, stop the bleeding, and go about tending to the others. Deza, if you could tell me what needs to be done, I can tend to him."

"What about your honor, what others will say?"

"I believe we have more important things to worry about, would be my response should those questions arise. If we are to face the battles ahead, we need warriors that are willing to volunteer and help their brothers, whether it is on the battlefield or in a medical ward." She nodded and indicated a bed, Shara taking care in setting the still-bleeding Ultra down. A few of the nearby wounded looked up at the smell of the new blood and gawked as Deza quickly explained what to do while also showing Garek the procedures.

Garek lightly smacked Nazo's face, eliciting a soft groan. "He's coming back. We need to put him under."

"We are out of anesthetics, and almost out of the painkillers scavenged from the dead warriors," she whispered, lowly enough for only Garek to hear.

"What about a stasis field? We could activate it and leave him until laterâ€|"

"No, it would kill him. See how pale he has turned? He barely has enough blood flowing to keep his organs in working order. That and we don't know enough about the Parasite; if he dies from this infected wound, he may become one of them."

"No," Rtas said suddenly, announcing his presence at the foot of the bed. "The Parasite doesn't work that way. The infection may be in his blood, but the body still requires an infection form to complete the process." He looked to Garek and took note of his missing gauntlets and forearm guards, as well as his rolled-up sleeves, "Major, get cleaned up and walk with me for a moment. I believe these doctors want you out of their way." He paused and removed his field kit, handing it to Deza, "Make good use of it, 'Telam." Garek quickly wiped the blood away and followed Rtas into the receiving area. "The Arbiter is currently in battle with Tartarus on the Ring. As far as humans go, I have seen the details of your operations, but what do _you _think we should do?"

Garek crossed his arms. "I don't care what you read in those reports; it doesn't mean I care anything for them as a whole. From a personal standpoint, I see the need for us to side with them, if only to keep the Rings from needlessly killing us all." He sighed, "But, my pride tells me that we should leave the humans and their Demon to fight on their own front while we take the war to the Jiralhanae."

"Hmm. We should all be so lucky to be graced with your mindset,

Major, but neither is really wise. We do not have the resources, or the manpower, to do either of those things. We need to gather a fleet if we are to stand a chance at all, which is no simple task, given our current communications networks; they are all under Covenant control, with Covenant codes. We need to send a few people out to gather support and spread the news."

"I volunteer, Commander," Z'aes said suddenly. "I know little of politics, but perhaps someone could come with me?"

"Razo," Rtas said flatly, the Spec Ops Minor appearing as if he had walked through the wall to reach them. "Explain what you can of our various political systems and accompany him to the nearest of our colonies."

"Yes, Commander."

"I shall speak with the human captive and see if any cooperation between our kinds would even be possible. As of now, and this is only temporary, your brothers in the Rangers are a part of my Spec Ops. You will be given tasks that only they would receive, tasks that no sane infantry commander would dare assign his troops. Do you think your brothers would be able to handle that?"

"Well, a few of them absolutely despise the Spec Ops, but I shall see what I can do." He moved to return to the ward, but Rtas grabbed his arm. "Commander?"

"If he does die in thereâ€|how would you feel taking his place? I also gathered from your reports that you are Ultra material."

"Thank you, but no. I have a hard enough time simply speaking to a group of seven or more people. Perhaps Major 'Rynav would like to take his place; he is an excellent leader and warrior."

"Major 'Rynav died shortly after you and Minor 'Drakos took the Command Deck from the Jiralhanae; his squad encountered a pack of stealth warriors." He scoffed, "The Jiralhanae using stealthâ€|the apes are actually learning."

"I suppose, if I absolutely had to, I would take Nazo's place as Commander of E-Companyâ€|or, what's left of it." Rtas nodded and finally released his arm. He found that Deza had stabilized and sedated Nazo by the time their conversation had finished. Shara was running various tests at the terminal beside the still Ultra, quietly humming without any real tune. "How is he, Shara?"

She flinched only slightly, not having heard his approach. "As it stands, he will die if we do not replace the blood he has lost. Do you know of anyone that would be willing to," she sighed, cutting herself off, "Never mind. Such a ridiculous thought to have."

"I do know someone who may be a matchâ€|" He picked up his discarded left forearm guard and activated the small, holographic computer on its underside. She watched him type the message, but couldn't read who the receiver was. That, however, was made apparent when Ar'n strode into the ward and stopped behind them, staring at the body.

"If he asks who did this for him, it was not me, understand? The

donor wanted to remain anonymous."

"You have his looks, but I certainly hope his attitude is better than yours," Shara quipped lightly, indicating a chair for the Minor to sit in. "This will take a little while to complete; he lost a lot of blood."

"If it keeps the bastard alive, so be it. And, he is not my fatherâ€|Gods, why does everyone think that?" A small mirror suddenly appeared in front of his face.

"Look at him, then your reflection, and tell me there isn't a resemblance." She looked to Garek with a smirk, causing him to shake his head with a smirk of his own. "I can see you too, you know? Glad to see you find humor at my expense on a matter that I take seriouslyâ€|very fucking seriously." He hissed when she poked a needle into his right arm. "Wake me when this is finished."

Garek beckoned Shara to follow him into the receiving area, where they continued the conversation they had started earlier. He did believe he could trust her with anything, more so than he could Ar'n, Nazo, or even Rotje, and he had yet to figure out where that trust came from.

He chose to tell her of the visions he had had, what he had done and witnessed, and a little about Ar'n when she asked what his problem was. She had nothing to say about his visions, so he moved back to Nazo, "Everyone I have had an inkling of trust for is dying or has died," he sighed, "I envy the dead, Shara. They don't have to worry about what goes on around them, what their next move will be. The only thing they do is mock you with their silence."

"Indeed, but you should also take pity on their souls. If they did not believe in the Journey, they will never reach salvation."

"I suppose my soul is condemned, based on that logic."

"You do not believe in it?"

"I was raised not to believe in suchâ€|how had mother put it? Ah yes, bullshit." She looked at him strangely, so he continued, "Do you know anything of the Ancients?"

"No, nothing."

"Then, there is much for me to tell you. This isn't the time, or the place, to do so; it's too dangerous talking about such things, even in light of recent events." She nodded in understanding, and they fell silent. She watched his face for a time, and placed a hand over one of his when a troubled frown formed. He flinched and looked at her shortly before turning back to look contemplatively at the wall, and her hand stayed until a bloodcurdling scream broke their silence through the door.

Deza rushed through the door, "Shara, I could use your help in here. That youngling, Kal, just woke up again." She was gone just as quickly as she appeared, and Shara sighed.

"Well, duty calls. Perhaps, when you get the chance, you could tell me about you."

He chuckled as she stood, "Yes, perhaps. Farewell, Shara." She nodded and hurried into the ward. He sighed and thought, _"What does she even see in me? What am I missing?"_ He shrugged and stood, deciding to gather the Rangers, sans Ar'n and Z'aes, and inform them of their temporary divisional shift.

The Arbiter had returned, bloody and battered, but victorious from his battle with Tartarus. Much to Garek's surprise, it was Thel 'Vadam, but he dare not make others that didn't already know aware of that. He watched from afar as he and Rtas talked about what to do next, Thel telling Rtas that he was going to get his wounds bandaged before going with the humans he had found to Earth. Rtas scowled, but nodded and told him that he would arrive as soon as they could.

Z'aes must have had a natural way with words, because in a few days' time, he was back on the _Shadow_ with twelve ships â€" three Assault Carriers, five Corvettes, two Destroyers, and a Capitol ship â€" in tow. One of the Destroyers, the _Defiant Absolution_, was in need of a Shipmaster, which Rtas readily assigned Z'aes to; the Minor was surprised, to say the least, but he accepted when Razo was assigned as Second Master and Yala 'Vaijec as Chief Medical Officer.

Garek was leading a training session with Joka, teaching the Rangers a few of the Spec Ops' techniques and codes when Rtas came over the ship's intercom, _"All hands, return to your assigned quarters and prepare for Slipspace entry. We are heading to the human's homeworld to reinforce the Arbiter and assist in eliminating the Prophet of Truth."_

Joka sighed. "This session will continue the moment we exit Slipspace, brothers. Major, I'm glad to see you got your fellows to cooperate."

"Well, sir, it took several attempts to get them to see that this is necessary. If we are going to stop the Covenant, we are _all_ going to have to make sacrifices and do things we don't want to do."

"Yes, well, working with the humans should be interesting, to say the least."

Garek paused to look at a map plotting the course of their jump, the path ending with the Sol System. "Yes, indeedâ€|" He parted ways with the Spec Ops Ultra and activated a group commlink with Z'aes, Ar'n, and Rotje at his private terminal. "Listen brothers, I don't know if Rtas told you this, so I am telling you as a reminder if he has. I want _absolutely nothing_ said about the Ancients to the humans. The last thing we need is them taking an interest in our homeworld, even if it is something as 'innocent' as religion. Do I make myself clear on that?"

There was a collective "Yes, brother" before he promptly closed the link, nodding to himself. There was so much he wanted to do before they all got themselves back on the battlefield, but he knew he didn't have the time. All he could do at that very moment was walk the path least taken, and hope that the storm had run its course by the time he reached the end.

_Author's Note: Yes, I realize that this ended abruptly, but I really

wanted to finish this so I could close the gap between __A Fire in the Sky__ and __From the Ashes__, and begin part three of this trilogy, simply titled __Rebirth__. I hope everyone has enjoyed the ride, and I thank you for reading._

_ -Garek_

End
file.